JANUARY 1, 1923
VOL. XLI No. 6

SEMI-MONTHLY JAN. 1, 1923

PEOPLE'S

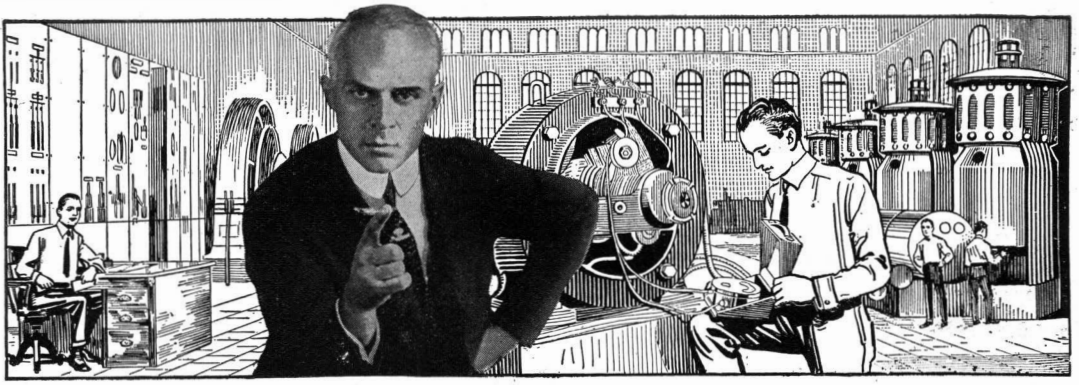
STORIES THAT STIR

"Coming Through on Number 8"

BY H. Keith Trask

PEOPLE'S

20 Cents



Electricity Needs You

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

Stop right here. This is YOUR opportunity! Electricity is calling you, and the Electrical Business is in for a tremendous increase. But it needs more trained men—at big pay. By my **Home Study Course** in **Practical** Electricity I can train you for these positions.

Earn $70 to $200 a Week

You've always had a liking for Electricity and a hankering to do electrical jobs. Now is the time to develop that talent; there's big money in it. Even if you don't know anything at all about Electricity you can quickly grasp it by my up-to-date, practical method of teaching. You will find it intensely interesting and highly profitable. I've trained and started hundreds of men in the Electrical Business, men who have made big successes. YOU CAN ALSO

Be a Big Paid ELECTRICAL EXPERT

What are you doing to prepare yourself for a real success? At the rate you are going where will you be in ten years from now? Have you the specialized training that will put you on the road to success? Have you ambition enough to **prepare** for success, and get it?

You have the ambition and I will give you the training, so **get busy.** I am offering you **success** and all that goes with it. Will you take it? I'll make you an ELECTRICAL EXPERT. I will train you as you should be trained. I will give you the benefit of my advice and 20 years of engineering experience and help you in every way to the biggest, possible success.

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Dear Sir: You may send me entirely free and fully prepaid, a copy of your book, "How to Become an Electrical Expert," and particulars about your **Home Study Course** in Electricity and the **Free** Radio Course.

Name.....

Address.....

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

Valuable Book Free

My book, "How to Become an Electrical Expert," has started many a man on the way to fortune. I will send a copy, free and prepaid, to every person answering this advertisement.

Act Now!

Good intentions never get you anywhere. It is action, alone, that counts. NOW IS THE TIME TO ACT.

L. L. COOKE, Chief Engineer

CHICAGO ENGINEERING WORKS
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Dept. 71, Chicago, U. S. A.

FREE!

BIG ELECTRICAL OUTFIT

A fine outfit of Electrical Tools, Instruments, Materials, etc., absolutely FREE to every student. I will also send you FREE and fully prepaid —Proof Lessons to show you how easily you can learn Electricity and enter this splendid profession by my new, revised and original **system** of Training by Mail.

Radio Course FREE!

Special newly-written wireless course worth $45.00 given away **free.** Full particulars when you mail coupon below.

Earn Money While Learning

I give you something you can use ***now.*** Early in my ***Home Study Course*** I show you how to begin making money in Electricity, and help you get started. No need to wait until the whole course is completed. Hundreds of students have made several times the cost of their course in spare time work while learning.

PEOPLE'S
SEMI-MONTHLY

Vol. XL. No. 6 January 1, 1923

CONTENTS FOR THIS ISSUE

Published semi-monthly by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. ORMOND G. SMITH, President; GEORGE C. SMITH, Treasurer; GEORGE C. SMITH, JR., Secretary.

Entered as Second-class Matter, September 5, 1917 at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, $4.72, Foreign, $5.40.

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, $4.00 SINGLE COPIES, 20 CENTS

$215 In One Day

New Invention Does Away With Dirty Coal and Wood

SAYS
F. W. Bentley
of Philadelphia

"Ye Gods—Some seller! I made $215 today!"

Buys Car with Profits

"Have earned enough in one month to buy me a new auto."
S. W. Knappen, Cal.

$7 Profit per Hour

"I started out and made $21.50 in about 3 hours. The Oliver does the work. It certainly is the real thing."
L. Zucker, Ohio.

"Sells Like Beer in a Dry Town"

"Am sending today for 7 Olivers. This is one day's orders ($85 profit). Selling like beer in a dry town."
H. W. Drew, Mich.

Mr. T.'s 28th Order in Six Months

"Ship 52 Olivers: 10 No. 30; 6 No. 1; 12 No. 2; 24 No. 4." (Mr. T.'s profit on this order alone is $711).
G. T., Ottawa, Ont.

Russell Earned $3300 in Five Months

"Have averaged $660 profit a month for last six months."
A. M. Russell, Conn.

Carnegey $1000 a Month

"Am making $1000 per month. I have made big money before but did not expect so much. Your Burner is just the thing."
J. Carnegey, S. D.

Berger—$258.50 per Week

"Send following weekly hereafter: 10 No. 1; 8 No. 2; 4 No. 5."
R. Berger, Ont.

$43 In One Evening

"I made $43 last night selling Oliver Burners."
N. B. Chelan, Wash.

NO wonder this amazing new invention is bringing fortunes to agents. All over the whole country this new device is doing away with dirty and expensive coal and wood in heating stoves, ranges and furnaces. Already over $1,000,000 worth have been sold. You can readily understand why this new invention—the Oliver Oil-Gas Burner—is sweeping over the country like wildfire. It does away with all the expense of coal—making every stove a modern oil-gas burner. Saves money, time and drudgery. Three times the heat of any other method. No wonder agents are riding in on the tide of big Oliver profits.

AGENTS
Are Making Fortunes

It Sells Itself

Agents find it no work at all to sell this amazing invention—the Oliver new improved Oil-Gas Burner. They just show it—taking only one minute to connect it—then light it. And the sale is made! This new invention is its own salesman. It sells itself! The Oliver Oil-Gas Burner is the most timely thing that could be put out. It dispenses entirely with coal and wood when all signs indicate that coal will be impossible to get this winter in every section. It burns the cheapest fuel—oil. It saves a woman work now in times when she is looking for just such things. Just as much or as little heat as wanted, off and on instantly by simply turning a valve.

The Secret of Big Money

Of course, now that you know the facts you yourself can understand why this new invention is going over like wildfire! and you can understand why F. W. Bentley made $215 in one day. Why J. Carnegey made $1,000 in one month and why hundreds of other agents are cleaning up big too.

These men know the secret of big money. They know a good thing when they see it and they know that the time is ripe for this new Oliver improved Oil-Gas Burner. They know that this age of high-priced coal and wood and the present serious coal famine makes it necessary for some substitute. They see ships and locomotives being run by oil and big buildings being heated by it. And they know that an invention that makes use of this cheap fuel for every home—and yet does it so as to give more heat than coal or wood—is the thing they want to tie up to.

Big Profits Quickly Made

You too can use this secret of big money. You do not need to be a high-powered salesman. The Oliver's amazing features sell it for you. When people see it they know at once that it is the thing they want. You will realize that this is a proposition that will pay you as big money as it does others. We have a definite number of open territories which we are ready to dispose of to those who act quickly. Every territory allotted is filled with big-money opportunities. And this big money comes easily. Because not only does this invention practically sell itself on sight but when you have sold **one** this one will sell several others as soon as your customer's friends and neighbors see it. And thru our special plan you get credit and commissions for every sale in your territory.

You can also make big money just by using your spare time. Note how N. B. Chelan made $43 in one evening.

Coupon Brings Full Offer

If you want to make at least $5,000 a year easily, mail this coupon now for our offer. We are not making any extravagant claims about this. We do not have to. We believe that your common sense will indicate a good proposition to you when you know about it. We want to give you the facts. Won't you write us? And by doing so quickly you will be allotted an exclusive territory with private selling rights.

The coupon will bring you the facts and will save you writing a letter. But mail the coupon at once.

OLIVER OIL-GAS BURNER AND MACHINE CO.
2412-M Oliver Building, St. Louis, Mo.

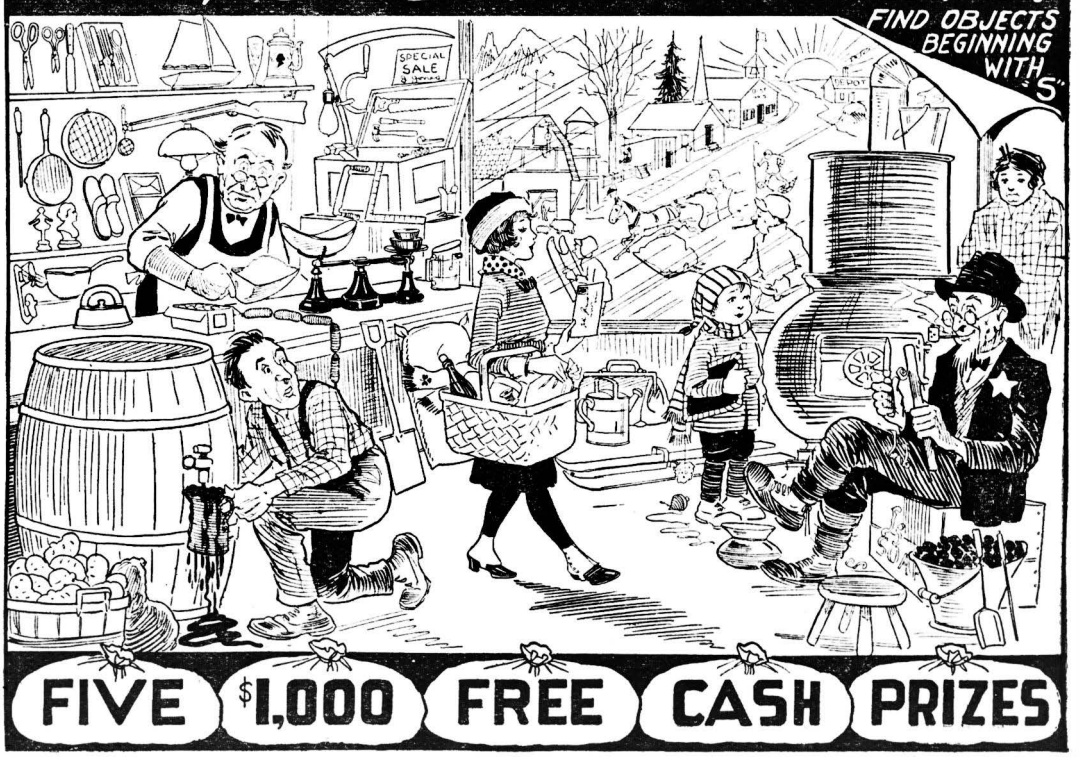
Oliver Oil-Gas Burner and Machine Co.
2412-M Oliver Building, St. Louis, Mo.

Please send me full facts about how I can make at least $5,000 a year representing you in my territory. Also your plan if I just wish to make big money in my spare time.

Name .....

Address .....

$7,000 FREE



Solve Puzzle and WIN!

WANT TO WIN $1,000? Sure you do,—then see how many objects you can find in this picture beginning with "S," like "Stove," "Shoes," "Shirt," etc. Have your folks or friends help. You'll have barrels of spare time fun and think of winning $1,000 besides. Five *$1,000 PRIZES—100 IN ALL.*

Winning $1,000 Easy! Here's How!

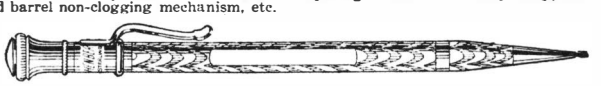
Send in your list of S-words as soon as possible. If your list is awarded from first to fifth place, and you have "Qualified" under Class A by sending in a $5 Henber Pencil order during this campaign, you will win $1,000; under Class B ($3 pencil order) you would win $300; under Class C (no pencil order) you would win $25. You can win without ordering a Pencil.

Advertising Campaign for Henber Pencils

We want every one to become acquainted with our pencils, the most useful of all writing appliances. They make suitable gifts for every occasion.

Lady's and Gent's Style

The illustration shows our Gentleman's Sterling Silver style (regular $3.50, now $3 or two for $5, Lady's or Gent's). The $5 gold (Lady's or Gent's) comes in Colonial Hexagon shape. The Henber has many distinctive features: Repelling lead device; safety clasp; chase engraved barrel non-clogging mechanism, etc.



EXTRA! $500 Lady's Prize. $500 Gentleman's Prize.

To the Lady sending in the nearest correct list of S-words an Extra $500 Prize will be added to which ever prize she wins if she "Qualified" under Class A or B when sending in her list of S-words. An Extra $500 prize will be awarded under the same conditions to the Gentleman sending in the nearest, correct list of S-words.

Wishing Will Not Win!

Don't wish and wish you could win. Go right ahead and try. Surprise yourself and friends by winning $1,000. There are five $1,000 prizes, besides many other prizes. Start winning right now by making up your list of S-words. DO IT NOW. *This is your opportunity. ACT!*

Others Have Won!

The following persons each won $1,000 in previous advertising campaigns conducted by this company: Thomas Damico, 1154 S. 12th St., Philadelphia, Pa.; Frank Vogel, 720 North I St., Tacoma, Wash.; E. J. Kilkelly, Kenosha, Wis.; Mrs. B. Bulfin, Milwaukee, Wis.

100 Prizes

Prizes	Class "A"	Class "B"	Class "C"
1st	$1,000.00	$300.00	$25.00
2nd	1,000.00	300.00	25.00
3rd	1,000.00	300.00	25.00
4th	1,000.00	300.00	25.00
5th	1,000.00	300.00	25.00
6th	500.00	200.00	15.00
7th	200.00	100.00	10.00
8th	100.00	50.00	8.00
9th	75.00	30.00	6.00
10th	50.00	20.00	5.00
11th to 15th.	20.00	10.00	4.00
16th to 25th.	10.00	5.00	3.00
26th to 50th.	7.50	4.00	2.00
51st to 100th	5.00	3.00	1.00

Class "A"—Prize if you order $5 pencil
Class "B"—Prize if you order $3 pencil
Class "C"—Prize if you buy no pencil

Prizes at Republic State Bank, Minneapolis.

READ THESE RULES

1. Anyone living outside of Minneapolis may compete for the free prizes except employees or their relatives of the Henber Company.
2. Whoever sends in the largest number of words which correctly name the objects shown in the picture starting with "S," will be awarded first prize, and so on down the list of 100 free prizes. One point will be allowed for each correct word, and one point deducted for each incorrect word or omission of a correct word.
3. In case of ties for any prizes offered the full amount of each prize tied for will be awarded to each tying contestant. The list winning the first prize will be published at the close of the contest. Enlarged copy of picture will be furnished on request.
4. Your solution must not include hyphenated, obsolete, compound (words made up of two complete English words) or foreign words. Webster's International Dictionary will be used as authority.
5. It is permissible to name either singular or plural, but both cannot be used. Synonyms and words of same spelling but different meaning will count only one, but any part of an object can be named.
6. All solutions mailed and postmarked Feb. 10, 1923, will be accepted. Contestants may "qualify" under Class A or B up to midnight, Feb. 24, 1923.
7. Write words on one side of paper only numbering each 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.
8. Three prominent people of Minneapolis will act as judges. Their decision must be accepted as final and conclusive.

Address Your Solution to **The Henber Co., 201 Flatiron Building, Minneapolis, Minn.**

What Do *You* Call an Opportunity?

IN my lifetime I have heard many men speak of opportunity. I have read some very fine definitions of this wonder-word. It has been the subject of many splendid speeches; authors have written abundantly about it in prose and poetry.

You have said, "I wish I had an opportunity."

But I am wondering what you call an opportunity.

Do you—as so many do—mistakenly associate it with "good fortune" or "good luck"?

Suppose tomorrow you heard of a $10,000 position seeking a man. Could you fill it? If so, it would be an opportunity. If not, it would be no opportunity at all so far as you are concerned. It would be merely a bit of information from which you could not benefit.

Opportunity, I believe, is usually a recognition of worth.

The biggest opportunity that can ever come to you will never be any bigger than your preparation—your worth-whileness.

If you are not worth considering, Opportunity won't give you a thought.

The biggest job of all the big jobs open and filled in the last twenty-four hours would have been an opportunity for you—

—*if* you had been prepared.

And I am not one who believes that Opportunity knocks but once.

The hundreds of opportunities which are here to-day will come again to-morrow—

—if you are *prepared*.

But you can be sure they will never be found on the door-steps of worthless prospects—men who are not ready.

Opportunity seeks and finds only those who have paid the price of preparation. She does not pick men as you pick a number from a lottery; neither does she cover up what she has to offer. Her gifts are an open book—yours from which to choose.

Pick the thing you want, and get ready for it. Opportunities do not come except as you attract them. LaSalle training offers a sure way to increase your powers of attraction.

Just bear in mind that the biggest opportunity that can ever come to you will never be greater than your *preparation*.

HOME-STUDY COURSES
THAT LEAD TO BUSINESS CAREERS

J. R. Chapline
President LaSalle Extension University of Chicago, Illinois

LaSalle Extension University

The Largest Business Training Institution in the World

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LA SALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY Dept. 165-R CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Please send me catalog and full information regarding the course and service I have marked with an X below. Als a copy of your booklet, "Ten Years' Promotion in One," all without obligation to me.

- ☐ **Business Management:** Training for Official, Managerial, Sales and Executive positions.
- ☐ **Modern Salesmanship:** Training for Sales and Advertising Executives, Solicitors, Sales Promotion Managers, Salesmen, Manufacturers' Agents and all those engaged in re ail, wholesale or specialty selling.
- ☐ **Higher Accountancy:** Training for positions as Auditor, Comptroller, Certified Public Accountant, Cost Accountant, etc.
- ☐ **Traffic Management—Foreign and Domestic:** Training for positions as Railroad or Industrial Traffic Manager, etc.
- ☐ **Law: Training for Bar; LL. B. Degree.**
- ☐ **Railway Accounting and Station Management:** Training for Railway Auditors, Comptrollers, Accountants, Clerks, Station Agents, Members of Railway and Public Utilities Commissions, etc.
- ☐ **Industrial Management Efficiency:** For Executives, Managers, Office and Shop Employes and those desiring pra tical training in industrial management principles and practice.
- ☐ **Modern Business Correspondence and Practice:** Training for Sales and Collection Correspondents; Sales Promotion Managers; Credit and Office Managers; Correspondence Supervisors, Secretaries, etc.
- ☐ **Banking and Finance.**
- ☐ **Modern Foremanship and Production Methods:** Training in the direction and handling of industrial forces—for Executives, Managers, Superintendents, Contractors, Foremen, Sub-foremen, etc.
- ☐ **Personnel and Employment Management:** Training for Employers, Employment Managers, Executives, Industrial Engineers.
- ☐ **C. P. A. Coaching for Advanced Accountants.**
- ☐ **Commercial Law.**
- ☐ **Expert Bookkeeping.**
- ☐ **Business English.**
- ☐ **Commercial Spanish.**
- ☐ **Effective Speaking.**

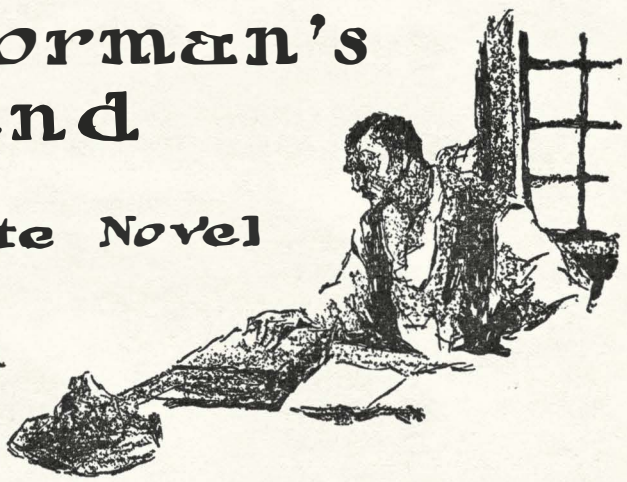
Name.....*Present Position*.....*Address*.....

PEOPLE'S
SEMI-MONTHLY

Vol. XL JANUARY 1, 1923 No. 6

Jim Gorman's Brand

A Complete Novel



By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Crater of Kala," "Sand," etc.

KING BRADEY, MAN OF WEALTH, SWOLLEN WITH POWER, DID NOT THINK THAT JIM GORMAN COULD STOP HIM. FOR A WHILE IT WAS A NASTY MIX-UP, CALLING FOR A BIG FIGHT—TO A FINISH. . . . . .

CHAPTER I.

JIM GORMAN closed the thick volume and exhaled a long breath of relief after the concentration with which he had been studying it. At the same time he scratched the back of his head, sure sign that he was still busy on a problem, and placed the book on a pile of others similarly bound in sheepskin, law books all, part of the equipment of the sheriff's office.

For a few minutes he looked out of the window to the busy street of Vacada, seeing through its present bustle the cow town he had first known.

Then the thoroughfare had been only a dusty trail between a scattering collection of shacks—mostly saloons, with a general store and two blacksmithies.

Now there were stores of pressed-brick and plate-glass frontage, the trail was a macadam highway, the sidewalks cement. There were schoolhouses and churches, a fire department and various lodge rooms. Banks and restaurants and hotels, garages, a steam laundry. Most marked change of all, as many women as men on the streets.

The old Vacada had nearly passed. Downtown, where the land sloped to the creek, where the cement sidewalks changed to wooden sections, stilted to the level, with steps leading up and down, there was the huddling remnant

of the cow days which some thought had been the heydays of the place.

Here were the false fronts of the saloons, now titled cafés, displaying soda water and dispensing stronger liquors in back rooms where gambling tables still attracted and dance halls extended their mock gayety. Such things —since the State had elected to leave the enforcement of the Volstead Act to the federal authorities—Gorman, as sheriff, merely regulated.

Sooner or later they would die with the growth of the town. But there were still cattle ranches beyond the suburban irrigation farms that had so swiftly increased Vacada's population and prosperity, and none knew better than Gorman how a rider, confined on ranch or range for weeks with scant outlet for his red-blooded, healthy vitality, is bound to cut loose when he comes to town with his pay check and finds nothing more exciting than an ice-cream soda or a censored moving picture.

Gorman had lived too long on the range himself not to be tolerant of such reckless spirits. He wanted to let the inevitable changes and constrictions come about gradually with the shifting generations, not to be abruptly strangled.

He knew the sterling qualities that had lived beneath the rough displays, the chivalry toward women, the sense of squareness and fair play, the admiration of true womanhood and manhood and the hatred of anything yellow and underhanded. Sometimes—as this morning—he doubted whether such virtues existed as strongly now. Assuredly vices still flourished that were not all born of the saloon and the card-table.

He rose slowly to his lean height and called to his deputy, busy in the rear, cleaning up the vacant tier of cells. Under the new sheriff, the jail was far from being overcrowded.

"Put them law books on the shelf, Pete," he said as the deputy appeared, an ancient whose bowed legs proclaimed the rider as well as his leather skin and the sun-puckers about his faded but still keen eyes. "I'll be away till middle of the afternoon, likely."

"Might as well take a real vacation an' go fishin'. Feller cu'd be deef, dumb, blind, lame an' ha'f witted an' hold down this job, way you've got the town. Dull an' dead as ditchwater."

"Find frawgs in ditchwater, Pete, an' you never kin tell which way a frawg'll jump or how fur."

Hope gleamed in the faded eyes of Pete as he watched his chief buckling on his cartridge belt and adjusting the long, blue sixes that had earned him long ago the title of Two-Gun Gorman.

"You goin' frawg huntin?"

"Frawg or toad. Pete, what d'you know about this new foreman out to the B-in-a-box?"

"Not much. Name's Moore. So he ses. Some ses he's a dago. Dark complected as a greaser. Come from where he don't tell, three months back. Bulls around down in the dumps by the bridge when he comes to town. They say he's mighty pally with King Bradey out to the ranch. Cook shack ain't good enough for him. Eats his meals in the ranch house, 'long with King an' his niece. I'm bettin' he ain't popular with her. She's runnin' with Bud Jarrett over to Two-Bar. He's some different from Moore. Same feller brought in the note for you this mornin' when you was out to breakfast. Me, I'd figger Moore a toad. You after him?"

"He ain't the biggest toad in thet ditch, Pete."

"Meanin' King Bradey?" Pete whistled. "He's some toad."

Gorman nodded. The deputy regarded him wistfully as he buckled on his spurs and donned his Stetson. He wished that the sheriff would tell him what was in the letter brought by Bud

Jarrett and if it had anything to do with the present excursion. But he knew his own one fault—garrulity—and he said nothing. More than once this habit of gossip, creeping upon him with age, had almost upset the sheriff's plans.

Gorman knew exactly what Pete was thinking. He had given him something big to chew on and to keep him quiet. The deputy was not going to risk idle talk about King Bradey.

Bradey was a very big toad in not so small a puddle. More cattle buyer than raiser, he controlled large tracts of land and big herds, constantly changing. More than that, he practically controlled county politics so far as they had anything to do with his own advancement or that of his friends—also the discomfiture of those who were brave enough, or foolish enough, to oppose him. Rich and powerful, big of body and suave of manner was Bradey, whose first name was often used as his only one and in the manner of a title. He had come into the county twenty years before to take up an ordinary holding. Somewhat suddenly he showed evidences of a healthy bank account and began to buy three things, land, cattle and men. He was still acquiring the last two.

If Gorman was out after the King, the deputy told himself, and a gleam came into his eyes, there would be something doing. King Bradey lived a good deal like a feudal baron. He had ten big ranches rolled into one and a hundred riders in the slackest of seasons, besides ordinary ranch hands to carry out his royal bidding.

"You find anything in them books?" Pete asked as he placed the volumes of law on the shelf.

"Not much, Pete. I've got a fair idea of justice, it seems, but a man can easy wade too deep in that sort of liberry."

"I've offen thought law books was writ an' printed for the feller who's in trubbel, ruther than t'other end to."

"I've kinder thought the same way myself, Pete. Speshully what they call the civil code. So long."

He went out to the back where his horses were stabled. Motor cars he ignored save in case of necessity.

"Car's all right for speed on fair-to-good roads," he declared. "Go across lots with 'em an' you're liable to git inter trubble. I kin go on a hawss where a car 'ud be stalled or turnin' summersets, an' I kin think while I'm ridin', 'thout botherin' with holdin' a guidin' wheel an' shiftin' gears."

He saddled his black mare, who whinnied at him and thrust her velvety nose against him. She was not only his chum but his confidant. Her nervous ears had heard many secrets that the wind blew away and the mare never disclosed. It was the old habit of the range rider and his mount, the discounting of loneliness and solitude, still clinging to Gorman, utilized by him when he was riding free to assemble and concentrate thoughts and plans.

He loped out of town at an easy gait, nodding to many men, doffing his sombrero so frequently to women until at last he rode bareheaded until he reached the outskirts of Vacada. He passed by fenced lands where the water in the irrigation ditches matched the Arizona sky, looking like wide strips of turquoise between the green of alfalfa or the chocolate brown of cultivated loam where orchards were coming lustily along. There were neat houses here, windmills, shade trees, little gardens. A pleasant, prosperous country, yet Gorman sighed his relief when they left the last of it behind and reached the wilder region of sage, greasewood and mesquite that rolled in a great plain toward foothill and mesa.

The mare quickened her pace, seeming to greet the tang of spicy herbage brought on the unchecked wind as eagerly as did her master. They left the road and started across the open to

where the Calista range rose, leisurely at first, in great mounds that halted at a steep escarpment, the cliffs cut deeply here and there by ravines, some of which were box cañons while others led to the true slopes of the range, timbered with piñon and juniper, like a mantle that had slipped down from the barren crests. Here and there a creek came lunging down. Now and then it was only the dry bed of one, an arroyo.

Gorman rode steadily toward a known objective, making the best speed for the distance and the type of terrain. Surely, as the sun mounted toward noon, they approached the southern border of the B-in-a-Box property. To the west lay the smaller holding of Bud Jarrett of the Two-Bar.

He had eaten a hearty breakfast early that morning, and, true to old-time range custom, he did not expect to touch food again until nightfall. But there was grain for the mare in a bag inside the slicker tied back of his saddle.

When at last they began definitely to climb, his face, that had been stern and a trifle grim with his thoughts, relaxed.

"I reckon, lady," he said to the mare, "that some of the old-time sayin's is crosscuts to the law. Possession is nine points in this proposition, to my mind. If this dark-complected hombre, name of Moore, actin' for King Bradey. runs off these folks an' destroys their property, which he appears aimin' to do, 'cordin' to this letter, they'll have to enter a civil suit to recover damages. The way King Bradey sits pritty with the gents who apply the law, they'll be gray-haired an' toothless afore they git a decision, which may be agen 'em. If they don't die of starvation an' hard luck in the meantime, havin' lost all they own.

"I reckon we'll have to try an' show Moore the foolishness of his ways. Mebbe King Bradey. He ain't actin' modern. He's usin' old-time methods an' he ain't choosin' the best kind. But they're the kind we sabe. I wonder if her man's showed up agen?"

In a little while they reached a spring that was fenced in. Gorman's eyes grew cold.

"I wouldn't wonder but this was some of King Bradey's doin', lady," he said. "He's runnin' with a high hand lately. Playin' the dooces wild. This is open range an' we need a drink. Also others. We're goin' to git it."

He tied the end of the rope he still carried—though not for the old usage—fastening it about the wire close to a middle staple of the three-wire fence, taking dallies about the saddle horn. A word to the mare, a swift series of jumps and the staple came out. In a little while he had a section of the fence flat, save for the posts. He led the mare to the clear water and, when she had drunk daintily and wisely, gave her her oats and lit a cigarette, sitting under the shade of some willows.

He took a letter from his pocket and read it over. It was the note brought by Bud Jarrett, addressed to him as sheriff.

DEAR SIR: Eight or ten days ago King Bradey's foreman rode up and gave us notice to leave. Sam told him he wouldn't, that it was open land that we had taken up and that they had no right to fence in the spring in the meadow. He had two men with him and he said if we didn't get off by ten days he'd drive us off. The place is all we've got and we've put our money into it, what we have.

Sam left two days after and said he would see you, but he hasn't been back and I'm afraid something has gone wrong. I want to tell you the truth—that Sam used to drink sometimes and stay away a spell, but I don't think he would do this time because one of the children is sick which is why I have had to stay, though I would have been afraid to leave the place the way things are.

I am sending this by Mr. Jarrett. He wants to help me, but there are reasons why I don't want him to get in wrong with Mr. Bradey, as he surely would, so I am asking you to do something to protect our

rights. Maybe Sam will be home by tomorrow, but I don't suppose they will come alone. Faithfully yours,

ELIZABETH JORDAN.

P. S.—The foreman said he'd burn down the house. He said we stole the logs.

"That," said Gorman aloud, as he folded up the note and put it away, "is what I'd call a mighty sensible letter for a woman in her fix. I'm sure hopin' Sam got home, for he don't appear to have bin in Vacada. An' this habit of fencin' in public springs is a foolish one."

He had finished his cigarette at the start of the letter. The mare was cleaning up her oats when he saw her ears prick forward at something concealed from her view, and from Gorman's, behind the willows. She did not move, but stood motionless as a dog on point. Gorman got to his knees with the litheness of a wild cat rising from a crouch, gently parting the boughs. The lightly balanced leaves were shifting in the breeze and gave him a better chance.

Two cowboys were riding in toward the spring. It was plain that they had seen the broken strands. They had reined up, discussing it. One of them drew a gun, broke it, inspecting the cylinder, snapped it back again and they both rode on. They stopped again, looking about them, their figures clearly mirrored in the water that showed them, from the saddles up, in reversed image. One of them caught sight of the glossy flank of the mare and pointed just as Gorman stepped through the willows.

"You ridin' for the B-in-a-Box?" he asked pleasantly.

"What the hell's that to you?" retorted the one who had drawn his gun, his hand falling to the butt of his weapon. He was a young chap whose burned face had not seen much of a razor as yet, for lack of necessity. The other was much older, lean like Gorman, with a hatchet face and a look of habitual repression, of a certain craftiness.

His hand fell on the gun arm of the younger, who shook it off angrily as he spoke again.

"You pull down this wire?" he demanded.

Gorman started to roll a cigarette, using both hands, performing the trick deftly and instinctively, his eyes off the job, centered on the boy.

"I sure did," said the sheriff. "You put it up?"

"I'll show you what I put up," said the lad. "Stick up yore——"

He whipped the gun from his holster and then stared foolishly, with fallen chops, at a strained wrist and trigger finger and the widening ripples where his weapon had plunged into the spring. Gorman's bullet had struck it fairly on the cylinder. Now the sheriff stood imperturbable, his finished cigarette in his mouth, feeling for a match. The movement of his hands had been too fast for look to register. The elder man spoke angrily to his companion.

"You damned young fool, don't you know who that is? Sheriff Gorman!"

"I—I didn't see no star," stammered the nonplused cowboy.

"You c'ud see he was packin' two guns, cudn't you? Ain't many men doin' that round here, outside of Two-Gun Gorman."

"All right, Dave, that'll do," said Gorman. He fancied that the man was overzealous and anxious in his enlightenment of the other. "I asked you a question," he went on. "You ain't answered it. You put up this wire?"

"Nope, we didn't." Gorman noted a certain furtive anxiety in the eyes of Dave and thought he knew the reason for it. He resolved to probe it later.

"I see you're ridin' wire this mornin'," he continued, "and the kid's hawss has got Bradey's brand—one of 'em. Lazy-H. So I reckon you came this way to see was the fence up. It ain't. More'n that, it's comin' down."

"Bradey claims this land," said the boy, recovering a little of his poise.

"I'll do the talkin', Curly," said Dave.

"*I'll* do it," said Gorman. "This ain't Bradey's land, never has bin, an' he knows it. Outside of that, it ain't fenced. If King Bradey figgers he don't have to prove or put up fence to use land you tell him from me he's mistaken. I've bin busy in Vacada lately, cleanin' up. I aim to handle the county the same way. You tell Bradey he's holdin' his reins too high for safe ridin'.

"This is public land. I'm lookin' out for public rights an' privilege. Also I take this personal. I may want to water here agen. I don't aim to pull wire every time my hawss needs a drink. You two git busy."

"At what?"

"I ain't got much time to waste this mornin', Dave Lorton. You sabe what I mean. You two nip that wire clear-*pronto*. You can notify yore foreman to come git his posts later."

"I ain't yore deputy," grumbled Dave. "It was clear he hesitated between Gorman and the wrath of Bradey when he knew his wire was down.

"You ain't likely to be, Dave. You an' me might have some other connection a'most as close."

The long shot told. Gorman knew of Dave Lorton and his reputation as a brand-doctor, a fakir of other people's bands with a skilfully applied iron. He had vanished from the county five years before under a cloud. Now, it seemed, he had come back in Bradey's employ. The sheriff noted that he carried no running iron. Just now he was riding fence for repairs. He had some slight notoriety as a gunman, but it was plain that he had no desire to try his skill against Gorman. And it was almost equally certain to the sheriff that Lorton was again under a cloud and feared Gorman's knowledge of it.

"How long you bin workin' for King Bradey, Dave?" snapped Gorman, his tone official.

"Three months," answered Lorton with a measure of defiance.

That probably meant he had arrived with Moore. Gorman nodded.

"Light," he ordered briefly. "Cut that wire. You, Curly, you kin git yore gun after the fence is down."

They both glowered, but the sheriff's face was stony. His cigarette was still between his lips, but his hands had dropped to his gun butts, signal for prompt action. He watched them as they sulkily dismounted and set to work. Once he looked at the sun and bade them hurry. Both men had wire cutters and the job did not take long, despite one lame wrist. Gorman waited while Curly fished his gun out of the water and started to dry it off.

"Fix that later," he said. "You're apt to be too quick with that Colt, youngster. You keep it for coyotes an' sick cows after this. I'm goin' to post this spring open, officially. Now you two hombres vamos."

They rode off at a lope toward a draw that led to the B-in-a-Box fence.

CHAPTER II.

GORMAN mounted the mare and pursued his way. He did not imagine that Bradey's foreman would attempt to carry out his threat against the nester's family until this, the tenth day, was well along, but he decided to take no chances and pushed his mount at good speed.

The sheriff's face was stern. He had entered office on the sudden death of the last incumbent of his office at the urgent request of certain prominent citizens and the force of circumstances crying for a strong hand. The late sheriff had been murdered and Gorman had brought the man in. Though the dead officer had been a personal friend of Gorman, the latter had recognized

his weaknesses and he had found a lot of work to do. Six months had caused en exodus of crooked gamblers, horse thieves and cattle rustlers. It had cleaned up Vacada to the pitch desired by its citizens and Gorman had begun to consider his work done. He was already contemplating resignation and the election of another sheriff. One matter only had delayed him, the appearance of a suitable candidate. Those in the field were politically affiliated and Gorman did not believe that a public officer should have his hands tied as these men were shackled.

A new era was coming to the county, a new type of citizens. Between whiles, such men as King Bradey made all the hay they could, but Gorman had not had the time to look much into Bradey's operations, nor any suggestion that it was especially necessary—until to-day.

Now he resolved to investigate before he tried for the retirement and the vacation he had dreamed of, hunting, fishing, prospecting, a visit to his old-time partner, now married and in another State.

Bradey's herd was always large. He needed plenty of range and water, and it was evident that he considered himself strong enough to take and hold where and when he pleased. He had been doing it unchecked and he was getting bolder.

"We got to stick to the job a while longer, lady," Gorman said to the mare. "An' so long as we hold it down, it don't look as if there was room enough in the county for Bradey an' me, not the way he's tryin' to handle things. Looks to me's if this new foreman of his who eats in the ranch house an' is so thick with his boss must be eggin' King on. Looks to me as if there was somethin' likely to be stirrin', lady hawss, somethin' stirrin'!"

In his clear, bright eyes there appeared a similar but stronger, fiercer light than that which had shone in the gaze of his deputy. The stern aspect of his face changed to a more contented one. Action, the war of his wits against a man of Bradey's caliber, the prospect of trouble, these were things to which Gorman's adventurous spirit reacted strongly. He no longer regretted his deferred holiday.

He had a hunch, a tingling hunch that ran along his veins like fire and ice in swift surges of sensation; that the affair of the nester was only the opening of troublous times. The closing of the spring, the advent of Moore and of Dave Lorton, brand-doctor, appeared more than accidental. If, as he began to suspect—secretly to hope, with the instinct of the born hunter—King Bradey was a crook on a big scale, a man without principles, a masterful bully using all weapons, all tactics, to pile up his fortune—his occupation as cattle dealer, also cattle raiser—gave him unbounded opportunities.

"I sure," said Gorman softly, "will have to look up Bradey. The way he's actin' don't look good to me. Git on, li'l hawss."

The mare responded. They had reached the mouth of a draw, a wide V narrowing into the foothills, coming out on a plateau at the foot of the first true cliffs of the range, a place of abundant feed, of water and some timber, not a large holding, but a desirable one for a man with small capital. It was here that Sam Jordan had built him a log cabin, fenced his pastures, tilled his soil and started to establish his rights as a homesteader—thereby acquiring Bradey's wrath by preëmpting ground on which the B-in-a-Box steers had always been turned for fattening before shipment or other sale.

Gorman passed some cattle grazing here and there. They had various brands, but they were probably all Bradey's. In his purchase of the five ranches that made up his main ranch, King Bradey had acquired the reg-

istered brands that came with them. B-in-a-box was his own special totem, but he had the right to use the others. The steers he bought carried their late owners' marks. The conglomeration provided a fertile field for crookery, if Bradey wanted to acquire cattle otherwise than legally and cover up his operations. The sheer extent of his private range made investigation difficult. Add to that the acquisition of a clever brand-faker, like Lorton—there might be others in King's employ equally efficient—and the opportunity was patent.

These things Gorman pondered over as he rode. He had had no recent complaints of cattle stealing in his own county, but it was possible that Bradey might have confined such affairs, if he was so implicated, outside of the State. The line was not far away. One of his ranches ran up to it. Mexico also was within a day's drive—or two night drives, with hiding out by day. It might well be.

It was the arrival of Dave Lorton, together with Bradey's last aggressive move, that opened the eyes of Gorman to such suspicions that were strong enough to determine him to engage in close observation of Bradey and his methods of dealing in cattle.

A torn-down fence, the wires evidently not old, gave him notice he had reached the line of the Jordan's claim. This looked as if the nester's cattle might have been driven off until he inspected the cut ends of the wire and saw that the severance was at least several days old. The act was simply a notice of trespass on the part of Jordan, a usurpation on Bradey's side, in all probability. Gorman had not had time to examine the patent books, but he felt sure that this land, although used for years by Bradey, had never been proved up by him. It was likely that Bradey figured he could even control the land office commissioner.

One thing he had overlooked, the appointment of a man as sheriff without an election, therefore beyond Bradey's manipulations, and a man of Gorman's type, fearless, efficient and naturally resolute in the enforcement of law and order and the upbuilding of the community. The governor, by whom Gorman had been given office, was, the sheriff knew, not to be influenced by men of Bradey's type. He had not sought his office, any more than Gorman, the office had come to him in a time of stress and the governor had run out of public spirit and won by a small majority.

Gorman's eyes grew steely again as he marked the wanton destruction of the fence. Since it had not been repaired, he feared that Sam Jordan had lost nerve, or lacked it, and had sought comfort in liquor, though he was not sure of that premise. Anyway, there were the wife and the two children, one sick. Her appeal was going to get action.

Jarrett had helped her, but Jarrett was palpably handicapped by his feelings toward Bradey's niece, as Mrs. Jordan had hinted in her note. If he interfered Bradey would put a crimp in his aspirations.

Gorman knew Jarrett. He knew him for a capable rancher, though inclined to be reckless, to show a wild streak now and then which might be only the gameness of a spirited colt—Jarrett was about twenty-four or five, the sheriff imagined—rather than a streak of "bad-mania." Jarrett had bucked the tiger more than once in Vacada's "Brisket"—cowboy synonym for "Tenderloin." He had on occasion drunk more than was good for him. He had made rough-house, he had "shot up" the lower end of town. All these had been holiday outbursts, betweenwhiles he ran his ranch efficiently.

He was the kind of man, Gorman believed, who would settle down with the right sort of woman and growing re-

sponsibilities and he wondered what sort of a girl the niece of King Bradey was.

To his knowledge he had never seen her. Undoubtedly she came to town, but, previous to his holding office, Gorman had seldom visited Vacada.

It was quiet on the plateau, save for the incessant whirring of cicadas. There was little air and the heat turned the air above the hot ground to shimmering waves of vapor, making the outlines of the rim rock uncertain.

Then the mare pricked her ears again inquiringly toward where the cabin of the Jordans stood. Gorman knew her hearing far keener than his own. There might be several reasons for her action, but, with his mind centered on the one object, Gorman applied the hint to his own project.

A little stream, bordered with willows, overflow of the disputed spring, worked its diverse way through the plateau and disappeared down the draw up which he had come. The trees gave him cover, but he wanted a lookout and left the mare ground-anchored while he climbed the near-by cliff, selecting a cleft for easier going and to screen him from observation.

From the top he saw the log house, with its chimney at one end, its patch of flower garden and vegetables about it, small, lacking many things, but a home.

In the doorway was the figure of a woman with a child in her arms, another one holding her apron. Facing her were three horsemen, one in advance of the rest. Gorman's mouth tightened. Moore had come early.

Suddenly a fourth horseman came into sight, urging his mount to a gallop, charging up and sliding from the saddle while the pony's hoofs plowed to a standstill. This man gestured at the one Gorman believed to be Moore. The newcomer he placed as Jarrett.

"Good boy," he said softly. "He's got guts. But he oughtn't to have got off his hawss."

He stayed to note only one thing more, the course of the creek that made out of a gully behind the cabin. His trained sight marked the way by which he might get to the back of the shack unobserved. The element of surprise was always advantageous against odds. That Moore was ready to be nasty Gorman did not doubt.

Suddenly the woman, answering a motion of Jarrett, retreated into the cabin and shut the door. Jarrett stood blocking it.

It was not very far to the shack. Gorman made it on foot, leaving the mare where she was. Bent almost double, he achieved the gully, came up through the vegetable patch between rows of corn to the back door. It was unlatched. The woman, bewildered, frightened, had left her rear defences open.

"Her man ain't home," Gorman told himself as he softly opened the door and entered the main room, the full width of the house, combined living room and kitchen. There was a partition to his right with a door in it. Behind this the woman seemed to have taken refuge.

"You'll put me out of the way before you git in."

That was Jarrett.

"We can do that. Jake's got you covered. We're comin' in. You quit meddlin' in other folks' affairs an' save yore hide."

That would be Moore. Hesitating to commit murder with the woman and her children for witnesses. But with the whiphand. One of them could ride round to the back and enter as Gorman had done. Only, it would be too late now. Jarrett's opportune arrival and his parley had blocked Moore's plans, unconscious of it as the foreman was.

"I'd mark that feller for a *malo*

hombre by his voice," Gorman confided to himself. "He's a wolf."

Both guns out, he was stealing toward the door when the woman came out of the room, carrying one child as before, the other following. They were dressed for leaving. She had given up.

Gorman wheeled and shook his head at her to stop her outcry.

"I'm the sheriff," he said in a whisper. "Got yore letter. Here it is. Where you goin'?"

"I've got to go," she said wearily, her voice spent so that it barely carried, her eyes red with watching and weeping. "They'll kill him if I don't. They'll run us off anyway and burn the house."

"Not this trip, marm. You're stoppin' right here. You go back in that room."

Moore's voice broke in, harsh and snarling.

"I'm through foolin', Bud Jarrett. You bin takin' up too much of my trail lately ennyhow. I'm giving' you till I count five to clear."

It was going to be murder after all. Gorman knew the note of killing in a voice. They had had Bud covered from the moment he made the break of alighting. He had wisely not attempted force against the odds, but he played a losing game with a man like Moore, unscrupulous to use any advantage.

The reason for it flashed over Gorman. Moore gave the key as he spoke of a crowded trail. He ate in Bradey's ranch house, at table with the niece. She was Bud's sweetheart and Moore desired her.

If he killed Bud he would have to make a clean sweep of the job. He would do away with the witnesses, burn the shack with the bodies inside.

Gorman was not an alarmist. He had seen many foul things done and this one was imminent. If Moore sought excuse to get rid of his rival, here it was. The two riders with him would be bound to silence by implication.

All this came and passed like lightning in his brain. He had not moved two steps toward the door. Moore was just counting "One."

"Shoot!" said Jarrett. "If you've got the nerve! Shoot, you rotten coyote!"

"The guts, he's got 'em!" murmured Gorman happily.

"I'm goin' to!" answered Moore, his voice a rasping purr of content. "Two."

Gorman's hand was on the latch. He wished he was sure of Jarrett's position. There was no keyhole. He darted aside to a window, looked through the side of a red curtain and sized up the situation. Jarrett might think him another of the B-in-a-box men, try to grapple with him.

"Three."

The young rancher was standing up straight, a brave man in front of a cowardly firing squad. He was a little away from the door.

"Got to chance it," said Gorman to himself. His lean face was stern again, but it held contentment. The door opened inward.

"Four."

He flung it wide, sprang out.

"It's Gorman, Bud!" he cried as he side-stepped, and both his guns barked at once.

One cowboy flung up an arm from which a gun dropped like a streak of light in the sunshine as he turned sidewise and rolled from the saddle. His horse stood snuffing at him. This was the one who had covered Jarrett.

Other shots blended in, with spurts of pale flame, with heavy reports, the vapor and stench of exploded gases through which bullets tore their way. Moore's horse reared high, shielding him and Gorman's missile struck it in the chest. It pawed the air, toppling backward, Moore sliding from the saddle seeking cover.

Jarrett staggered back to the door,

but recovered himself and fired in a duel of shots with the third rider. His second or third shot got his man in the shoulder, close to the neck, the blood spurting. The cowboy wheeled his horse, then lost control and the pony, wild at the shooting, galloped off. Jake's pony broke away with reins wild, started to cross the creek and got hung up in the willows.

Moore's horse rolled on its back, legs striking out wildly. Moore fired once over its belly and Gorman's hat sailed off as the sheriff pulled trigger, shooting with his left hand, the most convenient.

The bullet went through Moore's uplifted wrist. He let out a yell of rage and then the dying horse fell over on him, clipping him to the ground with its body.

"You're a bum shot, Moore," said Gorman coldly, as he stepped round the animal. "Had a chance at me an' missed. You won't git a second. You hurt bad, Jarrett?" he called over his shoulder.

"No. Think it hit a rib an' glanced off. I'm bleedin' some, but I ain't hurt to speak of."

"More bum shootin', Moore. You was plumb anxious to put him out of the way, warn't you?"

Moore's teeth were sunk into his lip to suppress a groan. He glared up at Gorman, speaking with an effort.

"Talk big to a man in my fix," he said. "That's easy. You-all started the shootin'."

"I suppose you were bluffin' with yore countin' five? Bud, can you help me git the hawss off him?" He picked up Moore's gun as he spoke, though the man's wrist was out of commission.

They heaved the dead brute over and Moore lay there for a moment. His legs had been pinned from the hips down and the feeling was out of them. The cowboy, Jake, called from the ground.

"Goin' to let a man bleed to death, damn you?"

"Cover him, Bud. Moore, you better tie up yore wrist."

He went over to Jake. He had been shot through the lungs. Gorman knelt beside him and made swift examination.

"You'll pull through, with luck. Not the kind you deserve. Now then, look out."

He gripped the man in the "fireman's lift," lifting him easily and carried him into the shack.

"One of yore visitors hurt some, Mrs. Jarrett," he said. "I'll fix him up an' send in for him later. We've got a hospital over to Vacada now, though he ought to be in jail."

The woman looked pitifully at the man who had been joined against her.

"He's only a boy," she said.

It was true. Bradey seemed to have young riders in his outfit, lads who would follow easily, craving excitement, boys started wrong and going swiftly along the wrong trail.

"Put him on my bed," she said.

"Better strip off the cover. He'll muss it up."

But she insisted on leaving the bed as it was and Gorman opened his clothes, baring the small hole through which the air sucked and blood oozed.

He told the woman what to do temporarily until a doctor arrived and left her administering to the wounded man with a tenderness that made Gorman shake his head as he walked outside.

"Ain't that plumb like a woman?" he said to himself.

Moore was sitting up, his wrist bound with his bandana, his dark face sullen.

"You want to remember you started this, sheriff," he blustered. "We gave this woman proper warnin'. You killed my hawss an' likely killed one of my men. Jarrett there, wounds another, hornin' in on some one else's bisness. This here is King Bradey's property an'

those folks is trespassin' besides stealin' lumber."

"Whether this is Bradey's land or not, you can't dispossess 'thout due process of law," said Gorman coldly, "an' that through my office. King Bradey ain't high card round here—not even trumps—when he plays agen public rights. I'm tellin' you to tell him that if this woman's bothered the least way, her fences touched, her water closed off, there's goin' to be hell poppin'."

Moore sneered and said nothing. Streaks of scarlet stained his gun hand.

"You're usin' the wrong methods, Moore, if you're in the right. If you're wrong an' I'm lookin' up the patents on this land right away, you'd better quit. This is nineteen-twenty-two. The Apache Kid is dead. Bad men don't git by enny more.

"You're a bad man. You think you're a curly wolf, but you're plain bad—so bad you're rotten. Don't forgit I was back of that door a spell. You was aimin' to kill Jarrett an' you wudn't have done that an' leave witnesses. Now, the Vigilante days is over, but there's a whole lot of respectable citizens that 'ud Ku Klux Klan you inter a suit of tar an' feathers an' leave you squintin' up a rope, if they thought you was plannin' what I know you had in yore mind to do. You'd be prayin' for me to have you in jail an' keepin' you safe if ennything like that happened, but there's times when I'm out of town an' that might happen to be one of 'em.

"There's yore man Jake's hawss, in the willers. You fork it an' go home to King Bradey. Tell him the minnit he steps outside the law he don't rank enny higher or lower than enny other hombre in this county. I'll look out for Jake."

"We ain't askin' you to look out for our hands. You an' yore law. We'll send over for him. An' you'll find Bradey's got somethin' to do with the law."

"Not the law I'm actin' on. Jake stays here. I didn't tell the woman at first becos I didn't figger she'd be anxious to bother with a cuss who was helpin' to rob her—mebbe worse—but he ain't fit to be moved. An' she's sorry for him. Somethin' you couldn't sabe, but she is. He stays. I don't know how her husband is goin' to feel erbout it—if he ever shows up."

Looking keenly at Moore, Gorman fancied the foreman blanched. Certainly the pupils of his eyes contracted. It might have been the pain of the wounded wrist.

"You got the best of it this trick," he said. Gimme my gun."

Gorman broke it, ejecting the shells. They had all been discharged. He looked at the gun, a six with a bone handle on which four notches had been cut. Moore's swarthy face turned almost black with suppressed fury as the sheriff meditatively fingered the gun before handing it over. It made his resemblance to a negro startling, though Gorman did not think him colored. Possibly part Indian.

Moore holstered his gun, clumsily took bridle and saddle off the dead horse, and, half carrying, half dragging the saddle by the horn, went to where the pinto stood tangled in the willows, too wise to try and extricate itself. The foreman of the B-in-a-Box made hard work of it mounting and hauling up the spare saddle in front of him. Gorman watched him grimly while Jarrett's eyes blazed.

"I'd have got him if his hawss hadn't reared," he said. "I'd do it right now if you hadn't busted his wrist. He shot me. Damn him, he was jest itchin' to kill me! I figgered you'd take him in, sheriff."

Gorman shook his head slowly.

"Got nothin' on him that they cudn't git out of with Bradey's pull. You see

I *did* start it. They'd claim they were here peaceable an' were jest bluffin' you, or kiddin' you. That's the reason they'd give for not surroundin' the cabin. Real reason was Moore was out for you. You spoiled his play. He aimed to run a woman an' two kids, one of 'em sick—off her property an' burn the shack. Brought two erlong case of interference that he didn't expect. He's a brave hombre, is Moore. I'll bet his spinal cord is yeller as a sand lily.

"I reckon this gits you in wrong with Bradey, Jarrett. But you sure coppered his play. How'd you happen erlong so handy?"

"I was keepin' an eye on the cabin from my place with field glasses. When I saw them ride up an' you not on hand I started out."

"I see," said Gorman. "Bud, you got a phone to yore place, ain't you? Will you git in touch with Doc Marshall an' tell him you're talkin' fo' me? Ask him to come up soon's he kin to treat a man shot through the lungs—some internal hemorrhage. One of the kids is sick, too."

"Sure I will. You figger they'll leave her alone for a spell?"

"Yep. I'll be hearin' from Bradey an' we'll have a show-down. How's that side of yours?"

Jarrett gave a pull at his shirt where it had stuck to his scathed rib and grimaced.

"Fresh water an' a plaster'll cure that. Did you see ennything of Sam Jarrett in town, sheriff?"

"No. I made inquiries. Don't believe he ever got there."

For a moment the two exchanged mute question with their eyes. Neither spoke. The wife of the missing man had come to the door.

"He's getting mighty feverish," she said.

"Jarrett's going to phone for the doctor. Keep those cold compresses on him. I'm goin' to open up yore spring an' repair yore fence, Mrs. Jordan. The doc'll take a look at yore kid when he comes."

"It's just a bad cold, I think. Sheriff, I don't know how to thank you——"

"I'm glad of it, marm, fo' I've done nothin' out o' the line of my duty. It's Jarrett needs the rewards. He's got in bad with Bradey."

Jarrett had already mounted and was on his way to his ranch and the telephone.

"I know it," said the woman. "And I'd have been the last to bring that about. Though I don't believe Bradey's been over and above friendly to him at any time, least of all since Moore got to be his foreman.

"You see," she went on, "his niece—that's Mary White, who ain't any blood relation to him, being the child of his wife's sister—is his ward and she ain't of age. I don't know just what hold that gives him over her, but he's always discouraged her marrying, though lately Moore's been trying to do some courting and Bradey don't stop him.

"Mary has been mighty good to us—one way and the other. She's always riding over with something for the children that we couldn't afford. Sometimes she's met Bud Jarrett here lately. That's how he happened in to take you my letter, thinking he might find a note from her. Bradey's told him to stay away from the B-in-a-box. They make a fine couple. She's just what Bud Jarrett needs, some one to steady him, and he's a fine man in the makings."

Gorman listened silently. He admired Bud for braving Bradey's additional wrath, but there was no doubt that rivalry spurred the action.

While the woman chatted he selected tools for opening the spring and mending the fence. He expected the woman to say something about her husband any moment, fancied she was holding off because of vague suspicion that she would not allow crystallization, the same sus-

picion he already held, that Sam Jordan's children were fatherless and his wife a widow.

"I haven't had time to round up yore husband," he said at last, ready to leave for the spring. "But I'll do that soon's I get back to town."

"Thank you, sir." She tried to keep her eyes brave, but the water crept into them and her chin trembled. "He may have taken one drink to forget his troubles and that led to another. It don't take much to start him off and he's been mighty discouraged of late. But it's hard for me to think he stayed away deliberate. He was awful fond of the children. And the last thing he told Moore was that he'd be waiting for him day and night and if they thought they were going to run him off they were mistaken. He meant it, too. He was nigh desperate."

"H'm! Well, while we're turnin' him up, don't you worry none. When the doc shows he won't want to move that man Jake. Movin' him might kill him. Would. I'm no doctor, but I know erbout gun wounds. If he dies it may complicate matters. If he pulls through an' stays here while he's mendin', it'll help warrant you peace an' quiet. He's a sort of hostage, sabe? You tell yore husband that."

"If he comes." She wiped a tear away with the corner of her apron.

"By the way, you got a gun? Or did Sam Jordan tote erlong all yore weapons?"

"All we had was a Colt's. Sam took that. He aimed to borrow a rifle in town."

"I'll leave you one," said Gorman. I gathered Moore's an' Jake's. I'll leave you Jake's in case you think you'd like it. But you ain't goin' to be bothered. I give you my personal word on that."

"Thank you, sheriff. I—indeed I don't know how——"

Thanks, especially from a woman, embarrassed him.

Gorman escaped. He whistled and the black mare came up the gully. But the sheriff did not proceed directly to the spring. Instead he gave the mare free rein and rode hard to Jarrett's ranch. Bud was at the phone.

"Got the doc yet?" asked Gorman.

"Not yet. Hardly got here. This is a seven-party line."

"Let me have it then. Something I forgot."

The something was a request to Doc Marshall to bring along, not merely his medico's kit, but all the groceries he could crowd into the little flivver roadster with which the physician performed miracles of automobilism.

"You follow the Dogleg Crick road, doc," said Gorman, "an' you'll find the road leadin' up past Bud Jarrett's of the Two-Bar. It's about three mile past his place. Log cabin on top the plateau. You can't miss it. An' have the groceries charged to me."

He had noticed a larder lamentably bare inside the cabin. There was probably no money in the house, perhaps none available. Sam Jordan would have carried the cash. The place was plainly furnished and scrupulously clean. The Jordans were struggling to make good and, until the little ranch was in full running order with established crops, money was likely to be scarce.

CHAPTER III.

Later that afternoon, riding back to the county seat, Gorman stopped again to water the mare at the spring where he had encountered Dave and Curly. The fence was still down. Arrived at Vacada, he wired to the commissioner of the general land office at the State capital an inquiry concerning certain descriptions of the southeastern corner of the B-in-a-box holdings. This filed, he returned to the jail and found his deputy yawning in the office over the local newspaper.

"Ennythin' stirrin'?" Pete asked his chief eagerly. "The town's fit to be buried. Plumb peacable. Nothin' in the paper."

"I've got a job for you, Pete. I want you to go up to the Jordan cabin, next to the Two-Bar. There's a woman there Bradey's foreman tried to run off this noon. Bud Jarrett and me happened erlong. There's a dead hawss up there you'll have to bury an' you may have to help nurse a young buckaroo by the name of Jake. He's got a weak lung."

Pete's eyes sparkled but he affected disgust.

"You git all the fun an' I wipe the dishes," he said. "Well, I guess I kin handle a few chores an' amuse the cuss. Do I get that buckskin of yores?"

"Yep."

"When do I start?"

"You've started."

"Wait till I ile my gun. What is she—widder woman?"

"Her husband ain't bin seen since a week or more. I'm goin' to try an' git some trace of him down town. I want you should see she ain't annoyed, Pete. I've got a hunch her husband ain't goin' to be back in a hurry."

Pete nodded. There was no fear of his gossip on that detail. And he was exactly fitted for it. Not too old to be spry—too old to sleep heavily, Gorman was assured that no one would interfere with the cabin, night or day, without danger of flying lead and Pete was a dead shot, if not quite so quick on the draw as he once had been. Gorman added a few instructions about the spring and the fences.

"You might find out what stock they've got, Pete—or what they used to have. I reckon they were driven off when the wire was cut."

"Then they're likely gone," said Pete wisely.

"Mebbe. You git a good description of them. An', if she asks you ennything erbout some groceries, you kin say you understand her old man ordered 'em sent up from the store two or three days ago an' this was the first chance they had to make delivery. No sense in her worryin' too much, one way or another. She's got a sick kid, too."

"What do you think I am—the Red Cross?" grinned Pete as he buckled on his gun. Is this visit of mine offishul?"

"You go as deputy sheriff."

Pete took his star from his pants pocket, burnished it with breath and the sleeve of his shirt and pinned it prominently on his suspenders.

"I'm off," he announced. "Forgot to tell you King Bradey run in erbout an hour ago. I put it on the pad. Said he'd like to see you in the mornin'. He was comin' in erbout eleven o'clock."

"Soon as all that?" said Gorman to himself as Pete passed out to the rear. Ten minutes later the old rider went up the street on Gorman's second string horse, born to the saddle, years younger than when on his feet.

Gorman sat down at his desk and arranged a few papers. Presently he picked up one infolded in a wrapper. It was a farm paper, famous in the East for its wide circulation and conservative statements. It had the annual habit of including an extra subscription for every one renewed, to be sent to some friend of the regular reader. An acquaintance of the sheriff, remembering a trip West and certain courtesies, had extended the yearly privilege to Gorman.

He invariably found some interesting articles, though the general run of farming information had little to do with Western methods. He was about to close the office and go to supper when some illustrations caught his eye. He read the text attached to them with increasing interest—once—then twice again. His eyes narrowed and kindled behind the half closed lids. His whole face lit up, lips tight closed, little

muscles showing in the jaw, the nostrils dilated. There was something about it of the hawk about to swoop, ready to leave its eyrie and take wing, or of some predatory animal to whom the scent of worth while quarry comes faintly down the wind.

"If that's so—and it's easy tested out—if that's so," he said aloud, and there's enny crooked work for'ard, I'll set a trap for them they'll never git clear from till they're behind bars.

"Funny no one ever thought of it before. An' it took an Easterner to discover it. A man who keeps a dairy an' peddles milk. I don't know how practical it 'ud be on a big scale, but it's sure got tremendous possibilities. As for what I'd use it for, I'll eat horntoad stew if ennything cu'd be better.

"Don't suppose there's another copy of this paper comes inter the county. That's plumb lucky, too."

In his enthusiasm he read the article through once more before he locked the paper up in the safe and went out to supper. He passed the doctor's flivver and the physician hailed him and parked at the curb.

"Everything O. K., doc?" he asked.

"I guess so. The child will be all right in a day or two. The chap you perforated ought to pull through. He hasn't lived long enough to entirely poison his system with rotten liquor. He'll be telling all his secrets before long. Really ought to have a nurse. Man, if possible."

"I've sent Pete."

"Good. I lied about those groceries, knowing you. Said the grocer asked me to bring 'em along and that was all I knew about it. Jim, you look as if you'd discovered a new trout stream."

Gorman grinned. He and the doctor had fishing as one of their mutual interests. Each liked to steal away when there was a chance and creel a limit of rainbows. The physician always had a steel rod in his machine.

"I've just discovered a new bait, doc. Read erbout it, rather."

"Keeping it to yourself, eh?"

"It wudn't interest you, doc. It ain't fish bait. Sort of cow bait, you might call it."

The doctor drew down his shaggy brows.

"Keep it, then, you pirate. I caught an Eastern brook this afternoon on my way back. In Dogleg Creek. Two pounds and three quarters. I was going to get the chef to broil it for supper at the hotel and I was looking for you to eat half of it, but if you're going to be so blamed stingy——"

"I'll be there, doc. And I'll let you in. I'd like a little professional advice on this thing ennyway."

"I'm not a vet."

"Know ennything about dermatology?"

"I should."

"That's what I want, then. How soon do I arrive?"

"Thirty minutes."

The flivver rolled on and Gorman went back to the office to retrieve the paper.

"I might need an expert witness or two if this pans out," he reflected. It's a bit new, but it's sure convincin'."

The telephone rang as he closed the safe for the second time and he answered it. It was a girl's voice, clear, fresh, but incisive, though the speaker seemed hurried.

"This is Sheriff Gorman?" it inquired.

"Yes'm."

"This is Mary White." The sheriff's eyes widened a little. "I've just talked with Mr. Jarrett."

"Yes'm?"

"I am coming into town to-morrow with my uncle, King Bradey. Can I arrange to see you?"

Gorman whistled softly.

"I've got a date with yore uncle at eleven," he said.

"Oh!" There was silence for a second or two.

"I must see you. Afterward. Where?"

"Ladies' parlor, Maverick Hotel, noon sharp, or name yore own time. I'll see we ain't interrupted."

"I can arrange that. I shall have lunch with a friend and—I've got to ring off."

The last sentence was whispered hastily. Gorman could imagine the girl hanging up the phone quietly and stealing swiftly from the instrument.

"Moore snoopin' round, I reckon," he reflected. "Well, he'll eat with a fork for a while. Maybe it was her uncle. If she's seen Jarrett recent they've bin meetin' somewhere close to Bradey's ranch house. I wonder what's in the wind? It's a cinch King ain't entirely got her confidence, enny more than he has mine."

He put the farm paper in his pocket and started for his supper with the doctor. The trout and sundry trimmings demolished, they went to the doctor's living quarters behind his office, a big room with a fireplace, shabby but preëminently comfortable furniture, some sporting pictures of fish and game and many books, shelved to the ceiling.

The doctor produced cigars, a water pitcher, glasses and a bottle.

"Nothing contraband about this, Jim," he said. "You can drink it legally. It ain't prescription rye, either. Bottled in the bond—a present from a grateful patient out of his own cellar."

"Said patient having once run a hotel with bar privilege? I used to be better acquainted with this brand once, doc."

"You've got a half interest in it, while it lasts. Here's to your cow bait."

Gorman laughed, knowing the doctor's avid curiosity where he thought sporting lures were concerned.

"That was a snap name, doc. But I want yore opinion. Read this. Is it practical?"

The other adjusted his glasses and read the article through carefully. He put down the paper.

"Thought you were out of ranching for good, Jim?"

"I'm still interested in cattle, especially when they git in mixed herds."

"Of course; stupid of me. This is practical enough. Better make tests in sufficient quantity to back up a presentation though. I'll help you. It's a darned interesting scheme. New application."

"That's all I want to know. Thanks for helpin'. I'll tell you what I'm after. It's just a hunch, but she's sure growin' like a yearlin' ca'f on spring grass."

He talked for the best part of an hour, the doctor listening closely, occasionally passing the bottle and the cigars. It was not the first time the sheriff had consulted the physician, friend of twenty years, whenever his problems approached medical jurisprudence. Moreover, the doctor was also the invariable physician to the county coroner. There was no doubt as to his discretion or his wisdom. He liked to consider such cases as if they were chess problems, helping the sheriff to anticipate possible moves. Long before Gorman took office they had discussed famous trials and cases in the making.

"I wouldn't wonder but what you're right, Jim," he said thoughtfully, when Gorman stopped talking. "It's more than a hunch, putting two and two together. But you're after a whale of a fish and it won't be easy to land him. But that idea of yours isn't bait, it's a landing net, providing he's feeding."

"I've got an idea about the bait," said Gorman, "but it's a bit hazy. I've a notion it'll develop a bit ter-morrer. Now I've got to go downtown an' see if I kin pick up somethin' erbout Sam Jordan."

"Expecting to?"

Gorman shook his head.

"Not much. I don't believe he ever reached town. But I will—sooner or later—one way or another."

"Alive or dead?"

"Yep."

"Go to it, Jim. If you're right about Bradey? And there's any way I can help you?"

"Thanks again, doc. I'm glad there are no strings on me. He sure can pull a few himself. But, if I get a line on him, I'll land him."

"I believe you, Jim. How would you describe him, Jim. Kingfish?"

"Nope. There's a trout out in California hits him better. Cutthroat variety."

"H'm! A trout's a game fish, Jim. Bradey's the river hog variety, if only for what he tried to do to the Jordan woman to-day."

Gorman said good night and made a round of the saloons, dropping in as casually as his official character permitted. By midnight he was certain that Jordan had not been in that end of Vacada for over a month. He had a good many reliable sources of information, and he exhausted them.

In the Last Chance he encountered Dave Lorton, in company with the rider called Curly. The youngster flushed at sight of him. Both had been drinking, but Dave showed few signs of it.

They were playing stud poker in the back room. Curly said something in an undertone and threw down his cards, shoving his chips over to Dave Lorton. The latter tried to keep him in his chair and then shrugged his shoulders. The boy came up to Gorman, his eyes flaming.

"You shot a pal of mine to-day," he said thickly. "You got one of yore damned deputies herdin' him right now. He won't be long. Sabe? An' if Jake goes west I'll git you, if you packed *four* guns! You'll see me through smoke!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE room had suddenly hushed. They knew the sheriff and they watched him. Gorman stood with his back to the bar, alert, his eyes steely. Crude whisky might spur Curly to foolishness. Gorman held a glass, half filled with mineral water, in his right hand and this he gave a gentle circular motion that made the liquid swirl. Involuntarily the rider's eyes watched it. The sheriff might try to throw it in his face. He had heard of those tricks. Friendship challenged had sobered him a trifle, but his brain had little control.

"Son," said Gorman, "yore pal had one of mine covered. I did what I reckoned the right thing. I sure admire yore attitude. Yore pal ain't goin' west. An' he ain't under arrest."

"That's a damned lie!" cried Curly. Gorman's other hand was on the bar, the fingers idly drumming. In a flood of passion he forgot the sheriff's reputation, his double-handedness. He figured to fire point blank at Gorman's stomach from his hip. He could beat the splash of the water. It could not distract his aim at such close quarters. But he could not quite keep his glance from the jiggling water. He did not know the trick, oldest of any sleight-of-hand diversions.

Murder-mad, he shot down his hand to jerk his holster forward and fire through its open end. The silent watchers tensed.

Faster than they could watch, before the youngster's hand reached the butt, there came a gleam and the muzzle of Gorman's left hand gun pressed into his stomach—hard—with an insistence that flashed a message to his brain—a message of death.

"Stick 'em up, you young fool," said Gorman in a low voice, hard and cold as ice, his eyes boring through Curly's, reaching the life instinct of preservation. "Stick 'em up!"

The boy obeyed, his face gray now, sweat on his forehead that came in a revulsion of relief. He was not to die and the fear of it had been sudden and sickening.

Gorman set down his glass and took away Curly's gun.

"You ain't fit to pack one," he said. "That's twice to-day you've been toein' grave dirt. I'm keepin' this. Don't git another one. Dave, take this maverick home an' educate him."

Lorton got up and moved over to the humiliated Curly. The players resumed their games. The incident was over. Gorman shoved the Colt into his waistband.

"Better let me have the gun, sheriff," said Lorton. "I'll see he don't git hold of it. I'll buy it off him."

"The gun yours?" demanded Gorman sharply.

"He loaned it to me," said Curly sullenly.

Gorman saw Dave's look of fury directed toward the other from the corners of his eyes, dulled instantly.

"Why?"

"Mine's no good. Cuts lead."

"You'll bring it in to me just the same."

"You ain't got no right to stop a man wearin' a gun at his belt," said Lorton. He was trying to keep his voice level, but he failed quite to succeed.

"Want I should arrest him for tryin' to disarrange my supper?" asked Gorman. His face had cleared and he spoke with easy good humor. "There's a local law agen packin' guns in town limits, but I ain't enforcin' it, so long as a man knows how to use one. I'm keepin' this, Dave. That ends it. You stick to wire cutters for a spell, Curly, an' limit yore hooch. I'll tell you agen that yore chum ain't under arrest."

His eyes were friendly as he spoke. Curly felt their influence. He knew he had made a fool of himself.

"All right," he mumbled. "Let's go, Dave."

The two left and Gorman went with them, watching them mount and ride off. He sensed the hostility with which Dave Lorton regarded him, the menace of a snake caught in the open. It was not part of the sentiment the brand-doctor had exhibited at the spring. It was a recent growth. And he pondered over it as he walked to his quarters over the jail and office.

One thing he had learned. That the riders of the B-in-a-box were acquainted with Pete's presence at the Jordan cabin. They were keeping watch on the place. He was glad he had sent the deputy.

He looked at the gun he had taken from Curly. He was not satisfied with the idea that Dave wanted to save the cowboy the price of the weapon. Lorton's interests were the kind to be self-centered. It was a Colt of thirty-eight caliber, long-barreled, a good enough weapon, but it had been misued in its time and was not new. There was a speck of rust on the barrel that had corroded into the steel so that it could not be removed, it had a slight dent in the sight and the rifling of the barrel was pitted. There was nothing about it that would make a man especially covet it for its shooting value.

Moreover Dave packed a gun of the same type as Moore and that of Gorman himself, probably of long ownership. He would not be likely to change it after long acquaintance with its weight and balance. More than likely Dave's trigger springs were filed. It was possible that he was a fanner, using his thumb on the easy-tripping hammer.

Gorman put it away at the back of his desk drawer and locked it up. But he did not forget it.

He was in his office at eleven when Bradey's big car rolled up. Bradey was driving and there was nobody in the tonneau. The cattle dealer came in with a genial smile, lighting a large and

oily looking cigar. Gorman refused another, indicating his sack of tobacco. Cigars with him were for hours of special relaxation and this was not one of them. He asked Bradey to sit down and the visitor took a chair, filling it with his bulk. He was burly, inclined to a paunch, but his body was solid, showing strength. His square face was set for good humor, but the quality of it could not mask the meanness of his mouth or the hard, cold quality of his eyes, pale blue and closely placed. Gorman rolled and lit his cigarette, waiting for the other to speak.

"They tell me the jail's empty, the town orderly and the county quiet, sheriff," he said. "Does you credit. Sorry the peace was broken yesterday. You've spoiled the table manners of my foreman, and I hear Jake Davis is breathin' through his chest. You sure mussed up my outfit."

His tone and manner were forcedly jocular. Gorman was on his guard. He had expected blustering, this approach was more subtle, perhaps dangerous.

"There was another man got clipped," he said.

The quick glare in his visitor's eyes showed a temper close to the surface.

"That wasn't your work," he said. "That's quite another matter, sheriff."

I don't agree with you," said Gorman quietly but definitely. He was not in the mood to assume friendliness toward this man who must bear him ill will. "The man who did that was protecting the rights of a defenceless woman. I helped."

King Bradey opened his mouth as if to speak and closed it with a snap.

"I don't look at it in that way," he said. "You believed you were carrying out your duty. This other interfering meddler acted without license."

"Duty of every citizen to aid defense of property agen illegal entry an' threatened force. Your men had no right there under enny circumstances, Bradey. This woman's husband bein' away might have made it look easier to the three you sent up, one to each kid an' Moore for the woman, I suppose; but it don't make it look enny better.

"I've had a wire from the land commissioner this mornin'. That land ain't yours. That spring ain't yours. Enny more than the one on the flat you fenced in. Wire's down an' it's got to stay down. That woman's wire has got to stay up and her cattle have got to be put back."

The veins swelled in Bradey's neck and forehead, but he gulped down his rising choler.

"My foreman may have misunderstood my boundaries," he said. "I've always used that water on the flat—fifteen years. Fenced it to keep the cattle from miring."

"Then you shu'd complete yore public spirit by puttin' in a gate."

"I'm not going to make any fuss over this matter, sheriff," said Bradey, his voice a rough purr and his eyes cold as ice. "I might."

"You might."

For a few breaths they eyed each other. Bradey's splay fingers worked slightly. The sheriff's sinewy hand, on top of the desk, might have been made of bronze. The gaze held until Bradey rose.

"If you're not inclined to be friendly," he said.

"As sheriff I ain't got enny friends. As a private citizen I pick 'em for myself." Again the veins thickened on Bradey's face and neck.

"You might have enemies," he said.

"On'y way an enemy cud injure me is bodily an' I've managed to take tol'able care of myse'f, so fur."

"I hope you'll always be as successful. I understand you took a gun away from one of my men last night?"

"A kid. He ain't quite man-size.

I'm bettin' he's a minor, or so close to it he oughtn't to be allowed a weapon."

"A rider carries a gun as a tool, sheriff. You ought to know that."

"I've known murder committed with a pocketknife—a wrench—and a chisel."

"I'm asking you to return that man's property. You have no legal right to it."

Gorman wheeled in his chair and took down a volume from the shelf.

"There's the civil code," he said. I've bin studyin' it some. If you want to git that gun away from me, you go to it through the courts. Meantime, I'm keepin' it. Possession, they say, is nine points of the law. I didn't steal it. I may have misunderstood my rights, like yore men did the line of the B-in-a-box. I'm open to conviction—in court. As sheriff I impound guns when I see fit. Enny special reason you want this partickler gun?"

"I want it because you have no right to try and run things in this fashion." Bradey's face was getting puffy and mottled, his eyes flecked with red. "There is no value to the gun other than that the rider will have to buy another. Out of his own money. I look out for their interests."

"He's got another," said Gorman. "I told him to bring it in."

His coolness got beneath the other's reserve.

"Because you are a pet of the governor you need not think your position unassailable," Bradey stormed suddenly. Gorman got up in his turn.

"I'm closin' this interview, Bradey," he said. "You're right in one thing. It don't do for a man to overrate himself."

"Why, damn you, what do you mean?"

"One thing I mean"—the sheriff's voice changed—"and that is not to be cussed by enny man. You want to git that. You know where you stand about yore lines now. Better stick a blue print up in yore office at the ranch. But cussin' ain't permitted in here, Bradey."

The cattle dealer glared, picked up his hat, and went out. Gorman watched him through the window, starting his car and slipping in the gears.

"I'll have to arrest him for speedin' if he ain't careful," he said to himself. "Now, I wonder what he came in for? To size me up? To play friendly an' pull the wool over my eyes—or to get that gun?"

Presently he took down the telephone hook and called the Two-Bar ranch on the chance of finding Jarrett at hand. A Chinese voice answered.

"Misseh Jallett? He not come in jus' now. If you like I give him message. Misseh Jallett he busy build gate in collal jus' now."

"No message," said Gorman. He had wanted to warn Jarrett. He could do it later. It was clear that Bradey meant, in one way or another, to even matters with the owner of the Two-Bar for his interference and his shooting of Bradey's rider. He had made no application for an arrest as Gorman had fancied for a moment he intended to.

Probably he did not court refusal. For his own reasons Bradey had wanted to smooth down the friction. The sheriff was inclined to think the effort one to erect a screen against any close interest at what might be going on at the B-in-a-box. He felt sure that Bradey would give orders not to trouble Mrs. Jordan. Equally certain that he meditated evil against the Two-Bar.

CHAPTER V.

AT twelve o'clock he mounted to the ladies' parlor on the first floor of the Maverick Hotel, asking the clerk to see that they were not disturbed, after he learned that the girl was waiting for him.

He liked the looks of her at first sight, not so much for the trim figure

and regular features as for the frankness of the hazel eyes and the firmness of her mouth, well shaped, full enough for affection but indicative of both good humor and steadfastness of will and purpose.

She looked at him closely and then smiled as she offered her hand.

"You look just as I expected you to," she said. "I've seen you before, of course, and I've heard a lot of you, but it's not like meeting any one."

Jim Gorman, when not in action on their behalf, was diffident with the other sex. He was woman shy. To Vacada he was a hopeless bachelor. To himself he was a man who had met many women who were not the right ones for him, but who sometimes seemed to think so—and he had never yet met the one he was sure he wanted. Yet he made a gallant speech.

"You look to me like Bud Jarrett was a lucky man," he said.

The girl colored, but did not lower her eyes.

"I hope he'll always think so," she said simply. Gorman liked the avowal. Here was the girl for Jarrett, surely. He warmed toward her.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "I am a friend of Bud Jarrett. He did a fine thing to-day."

"I must meet my friend soon," she said. "Mr. Bradey may look for me there. "Her eyes thanked him for what he had said about her lover. "I hardly know what to tell you and what not to," she went on. "I do not want to place myself in the position of being disloyal to my own, but there is no blood relationship between my uncle and myself. And—I expect to marry Bud Jarrett."

"You play yore own hand, Miss White an' make hearts trumps," said Gorman. "You won't go far wrong if you do that. I'm talkin' from other people's experience, but I've seen a heap of it. First an' foremost, a man an' a woman, when they're sure of each other —I ain't over handy at expressin' myse'f at these sort of things, but you'll git my meanin'—a man an' a gal belong to each other. It's their life ahead of the one that's goin' out, meanin' their own generation. There's not even blood ties in yore case. I ain't figgerin' you for disloyal. An' I'm apologizin' fo' talkin' in this way to you, as if I'd known you fo' a long time."

"It's kind of you and I understand," she said. "I've heard many things of you and I've always thought I'd like you for a friend. You say you are Bud's. And he does not realize that my uncle, who is set against him, is really dangerous. He has a lot of power, a lot of influence, and I know that he means to try and separate us and also to do harm to Robert. All that he can. He pretends it is on account of Robert's interference yesterday, but there are other reasons—and of course he was in the wrong himself there.

"He was not opposed to Robert in the beginning. Or he did not seem to be. But he has changed since that man Moore came, three months ago. I think that Moore has been employed by him some time, managing another ranch, in New Mexico. But sometimes he acts more like a partner. My uncle is my guardian. My mother left me fifty thousand dollars which comes to me when I am of age, fourteen months from now. Until then he has control of the investment. He has always given me a liberal allowance and he has made a great deal of money.

"But now—he seems to be indebted in some way to Moore. He has taken him into the ranch house to live. I hope I am democratic, but—Moore is coarse and I cannot understand why uncle gives him these liberties.

"Moore has tried to—make love to me. I suppose he calls it that. He pretends to want to marry me and uncle favors him. It seems impossible. I

have not told Robert all of what happens—very little—he is hot tempered and there would be trouble. Moore brought several hands with him and they are a wild lot. The ranch is without discipline lately. I mean without any sort of ordinary regulations. They obey orders, but they do it—more as if they were all holding an interest as part owners than hired men. It's hard for me to express myself. I'm not a snob, I'm a western girl—but there is too much license. It isn't that they don't treat me with respect—but you know how our riders usually treat a woman and these men are—not rude—but they look at me as if—as if there was some sort of joke between themselves. About their being hired.

"I am talking too long and, aside from what I wanted to see you about. Moore came home last night in an ugly mood. He had words with my uncle. I heard them threatening each other. Moore was savage at you for shooting him and my uncle told him to be careful. Moore said my uncle was making a fool of him.

"This was all before supper. When they came in to the table Moore was drunk. He wanted me to cut his meat up for him. He—he said I had better get used to it. I left the table. My uncle said something to him and he answered 'I'll handle her. She'll gentle down when we get rid of that interfering fool.'

"Later on I went out—to meet—Bud. I dare not stay away long from the ranch house lately so he has been riding in, leaving his horse and meeting me in a little grove back of the house. There is a man named Dave Lorton who came with Moore, together with several other riders. He has been watching me. He is a gunman. I told Bud he must not risk coming on the ranch again. I was sure they would pick a quarrel with him and kill him.

"It is hard to explain, but the atmosphere lately is charged with something wrong—deadly. Moore grins at me in a way that is intolerable and uncle encourages him. It is growing impossible."

"Why don't you marry Bud? He'll take care of you?"

"I am afraid. You haven't heard everything. Bud told me what had happened at the Jordan place and how Moore had fired at him after threatening him. There are more than a hundred riders on the ranch. If I married Bud and lived on the Two-Bar they would do something desperate. Bud won't run away—neither would I. Lately uncle has been drinking and when he does he is—he changes into something not quite human. He is strong-willed and it seems as if a devil took possession of him. Not raging, but cold and relentless. Sometimes I think he is afraid of Moore, in a way, but when he has been taking whisky I always think they are going to have a frightful quarrel.

"I made Bud leave early. When I went back I heard loud voices in the living room. There is a little slide where Pedro—he's the house cook, puts the dishes through from the kitchen to his wife, Maria, who is the housekeeper. There was no one in the kitchen. Pedro and Maria have a little cabin of their own and they were through for the day. So I listened.

"Your name was mentioned first. Moore wanted to know why uncle didn't have you put out of office. He said that uncle had boasted of his owning the county and he said this was the time to show it. Uncle said that the only way to handle you was by smoothing things over and Moore said uncle was afraid of you, and that *he* wasn't. He said you were only one man and it only needed one bullet.

"Uncle had been drinking. I saw the bottles and glasses through the little slide which I opened a little way.

"'You leave the sheriff to me,' he said. 'It was a fool move to start anything in the county. We've cleaned up, or we can within a few weeks. This man Gorman is best left alone. I've done it, so far. This is my end of the deal and you'll leave it to me.'

"They glared at each other and I thought there would be trouble right then, but Moore laughed and filled up his glass.

"'All right,' he said. But you're making a bad move in not getting him out of the way.' I'm not pretending to repeat exactly what they said—only the general meaning of it."

Gorman nodded. The girl was climbing in his opinion. Evidently she had been living under a strain that would have terrified most women, but she had kept not only her wits but her courage.

"'I'm ready for the clean-up,' said Moore, 'after I've attended to two things. I want the girl and I'm going to get even with this lover of hers. I'd have got him out of the way to-day, but for that sheriff of yours interfering.' 'He can shoot too straight for you,' said my uncle. 'That's another reason for you to leave him to me. As for Jarrett, your methods are too crude, Moore. I tell you you can't put a man out of the way in this county and get away with it. There are other methods besides killing a man to get rid of him. Listen.'

"They lowered their voices while uncle did most of the talking. In a little while Moore laughed and pounded on the table.

"'By God,' he said, 'you've got the brains, Bradey. I'll take my hat off to you. We break him and add to our own pile. That suits me. I creased him in the ribs anyway.'

"That meant Bud, of course. 'You can try your hand at Gorman,' he went on, 'but I'll take a crack at that sharpshootin' sheriff before I quit the country. He's dangerous, but this scheme of yours has got him whipped.'

"They had been almost ready to shoot each other before, but now they were close friends again. And they were both getting drunk—drunk enough, I mean, to bring all their viciousness out and to brag a little. Whisky doesn't seem to affect them like it does some people. They can always walk and talk. It just makes them ugly.

"My uncle went to the telephone that goes to the bunk house and I heard him tell Dave Lorton to come over.

"Then Moore leaned over the table. His voice had changed. He seemed suspicious and inclined for trouble again.

"'It's understood I get the girl, without any damned nonsense,' he said. 'We're splitting even and I'm not asking you for any accounting of her money. Fifty thousand dollars—and cheap at the price! She's been acting up high and mighty with me lately, but I'll get full value. Trust me for that. You're not double crossing me there, Bradey.'

"My blood was cold and hot by turns, but you can imagine how I felt when my uncle laughed. 'She's the least of my worries, Moore,' he said. 'Glad to get her off my hands so long as it isn't to Bud Jarrett. I'll teach him to interfere in my affairs. As for the girl, she's no kin of mine. She's been a bit above herself with me for a long time. A taming will do her good. It will take her pride down a bit when she finds herself tied up to a breed.' And he laughed until he began to choke. But he sobered up a little when he saw Moore's face. I couldn't, the way he sat, but it must have been angry.

"'I want to tell you, King Bradey,' he said, 'that I'm prouder of my Cherokee blood than I am of the white that's in me. If I'm a breed, I'm half again better than you are.'

"I was listening to my uncle prac-

tically selling me for fifty thousand dollars to a man who is half Cherokee Indian. Selling me for fifty thousand dollars! That is what it amounted to. I could hardly believe my ears, though, since Moore has been here, I have seen King Bradey in a new light. As if all the bad in him had worked out to the surface. I have never believed he really liked me. He has always been tolerant rather than kind with his smooth manner that I always felt was a mask.

"Of course they couldn't marry me by force unless they drugged me and I should look out for that. But Moore would stick at nothing. He may be married.

"I only heard one thing more. That helped me. They talked about the time they expected to clean up. Bradey—I am not going to call him my uncle any longer—said that a man named Marshall would be out in the last part of September. It seemed that he is going to buy out the ranch and some cattle. The rest they will sell beforehand.

" 'I can wait till then,' said Moore, 'if the lady is willing to hold off.'

"I don't know what I should have done. I had a mad desire to go in and face them, to tell them I had heard all they had said, but I saw that that would be playing into their hands. They might keep me a prisoner. Pedro and Maria would willingly be my jailers. She will not let me in the kitchen without my insisting on it. Pedro is even surlier. I have never been able to get along with them, since I came back from the East. And then I could not warn Bud or perhaps learn anything more of their plans.

"But I might have gone in, only I heard some one at the outside door of the kitchen. The men often came in that way and I knew this must be Dave Lorton. There was no light in there and I squeezed into a corner between a high cupboard and the wall. Dave came in and lit a match. My uncle heard him and called out to know who was there. Dave answered and Moore opened the door and came a little way into the kitchen. They did not see me, but Moore saw the light in the living room, through the slide and he came over and closed it. He passed so close to me I could smell the whisky on his breath. The light from the living room door threw the rest of the kitchen in deep shadow and he did not suspect anything. He closed the slide automatically, I think, without thinking much of what he did. He was chuckling to himself.

" 'We've got a job for you, Dave,' he said and then they went in. I didn't dare open the slide again after that, so I went up to my room and I got my gun. I don't think Bradey knows I have one. It has been with me ever since."

She reached inside the opening of her trim, mannish shirtwaist, and brought out a flat, businesslike automatic of small but quite efficient caliber. Gorman took it for a moment, looking it over and passed it back without comment.

"I don't know why I never told him that I had it," she went on. "I suppose at first I thought he would think me silly with foolish ideas about the West after my school. And afterward it must have been some sort of intuition that kept me from letting him know that I kept it and practiced with it when I went out riding. I am a pretty good shot. I can defend myself. I think that perhaps I never quite trusted him. I've often felt that I only knew the outside shell of him, polished up by himself to deceive. He always used to smile, but I don't believe I ever read any real expression in his eyes.

"That's all. Except that I am afraid. Bud won't take the proper precautions."

"Talked with him?" asked Gorman.

"No. I am afraid to use the telephone at the ranch. But I know that

he will only laugh at me for being afraid."

"How erbout yore own position—with Moore an' King Bradey?"

"I am not goin' to tell him about that. He thinks only that Moore pays me attentions which he knows are distasteful to me. But if I told him what I have told you he would make some hasty move and give them the chance they are looking for."

"You don't have to stay out to the ranch," he said. "Bradey can't compel you to do that, even if he is yore guardian. Why not come in an' stay with some one, the friend you are goin' to lunch with?"

The girl shook her head, eyes steadfast, chin up and steady.

"No. There is no real danger to me for some weeks, until that buyer comes."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that."

"I'll take the risk—with this." She held up the automatic before she put it away. "If I leave, I won't be in a position to find out any more about their plans against Bud."

"Jest what is it you wish me to do, Miss White?" asked Gorman. Her face fell.

"Why—I hardly know." It was plain that she had expected the sheriff to show some signs of intended action. Instead he sat looking at her steadily, though his eyes held the admiration for her pluck that his brain registered. Here was a girl in a thousand—a wonderful prize for Bud Jarrett. Gorman was beginning to wonder whether Jarrett would prove properly appreciative.

"I have been seeing old things over again differently the last few weeks," she said. "I remember that Bradey never talked details of his battle deals with me and shut off all interest I showed in them when I knew a herd had been sold or partly sold or new steers had arrived. And, whenever new steers did come, it was always in the night. I asked him about that once and he only said that night travel was better for the cattle. But I can recollect plainly that he looked at me suspiciously.

"I've seen some of the men who came with Moore, at various times. They brought in cattle. And there was always more or less of a jest between them whenever I'd happen to ask where the steers came from. They always had an answer ready, but they'd look at each other knowingly and I knew they grinned behind my back."

She paused for a moment and Gorman continued to look at her inquiringly.

"Well?" he asked.

"King Bradey has made a good deal of money. I don't believe he has done it honestly. I believe that Moore was a partner with him in stealing cattle, buying cattle that he knew were stolen, anyway. Moore might only have been his foreman on this ranch across the state line, but he intends to share the profits when they make their clean-up in November. That is my belief. I don't know whether you agree with me or not—I suppose I haven't got anything really definite. But they have tried to injure the Jordans, Moore acting for Bradey there. You prevented them. I thought you might like to hear that they are up to other rascality and that you might feel it your duty to prevent it."

For the first time she looked at Gorman uncertainly.

"If we should pin ennything on Bradey erbout handlin' stolen cattle, you're li'ble not to see much of yore fifty thousan' dollars," said the sheriff.

"They don't intend me to get it in any case. And it makes no difference to me—or to Bud. He'd rather have me without any money. I know that King Bradey is unscrupulous, that Moore is worse. And I thought, as a friend of Bud's, as you said you were just now,

aside from being sheriff, that I might interest you."

She got up from her chair, her manner a little stiff, her eyes hurt. Gorman stood in front of her and at the look on his face her own lightened.

"I told you I figgered Bud Jarrett was a lucky man," he said. "I'm plumb sure of it now. If you were a man I'd say you were white all through an' square on all six sides. I ain't handy at changin' that inter a feminine compliment. It's barely possible Bud don't appreciate you properly. If he don't, an' you ever find it out, you send for me. After I've buried him I'll see if there's a chance for me. That may not strike you as much of a compliment, but you're the on'y woman I've ever gone that fur with—or wanted to."

He said it all with a laugh, trying to lighten matters for the girl's ease, but there was a quality in his gaze that told her he meant much that his words did not necessarily imply.

"You're a real she-woman," Gorman went on. "That's he-man translated. You're plucky an' you're smart as a lawyer an' I don't have to tell you you're sure easy to look at. I'll have a talk with Bud. You've told me enough to confirm what I've been beginnin' to suspect erbout Bradey an' what I *know* erbout Moore—that they're a pair of rascals. But we haven't got ennything on 'em, as yet. On'y the Jordan dispossession. Bud seemed to think I wud act on that, but I wanted to give 'em a longer picket rope an' hope they'd trip up.

"I've got a few things aside from what you've told me an' I'm goin' to git busy. I thought I'd have to set a trap or two, long distance, but they've done it for themselves, or they're goin' to. Occur to you what they meant by breakin' Bud an' addin' to their own pile at the same time?"

She shook her head.

"I suppose I'm stupid, but it doesn't, unless they mean to try and get hold of the Two-Bar for themselves. I know they say Bradey controls the courts."

"When he can fix it so the court kin save its own face. An', if they're goin' to git out end of September, they ain't got time for ennything of that sort, disputin' title or claimin' it after they disposed of Bud. What they're after is to run off his cattle, fake the brand—Dave Lorton's a wizard at that sort of thing—an' I reckon he's bin doin' it for Moore and Bradey right erlong—an' then laff at Bud. Not much of a trick to change Two-Bar into a Lazy-H, one of Bradey's own brands."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened with understanding. "Then you'll tell Bud to ride herd or bring them in."

"No. He ain't got the feed to bring 'em in. Grass is gettin' scarce an' they want all they kin git of it right now. Ridin' herd might mean shootin'. They'll have fifty men if they need it, to Bud's four or five.

"They'll be keepin' tab on what he does with his steers from now on—if I'm right. It's my scheme to bait that trap they've fixed for themselves with erbout thirty of Bud's steers, left in a nice handy place for a run-off. Then we'll let 'em do what they've a mind to."

"But you said they would rebrand and laugh at us. And wouldn't the cross bar on the H show fresh anyway?"

"Not the way Dave'll fix it—brandin' with a blanket."

"Then I don't see——"

Gorman's eyes gleamed.

"It ain't supposed to be wisdom to tell a woman a secret," he said. "But you've sure earned it an', if you gave it away it wud spoil everything for Bud an' you. Not that I'm afraid of yore doin' it. I've got some illustrations up to my office demonstratin' what I'm goin' to tell you, but it won't take a minnit to explain the way it works, if you've got the time."

She looked at her wrist watch.

"I'm to meet my friend in ten minutes," she said. "Please tell me."

"It's plumb funny no one ever thought of it before," he commenced. "In a way it's right in line with police work——"

Her face glowed with understanding and approval when he had finished.

"I'll introduce Bud to the idea this afternoon," he said. "No tellin' when they may start their tricks. Now I reckon you'd better go down first. Through the hall here and out at the ladies' entrance. I'll go through the office. Good-by."

CHAPTER VI

He strolled leisurely through the office and sat in one of the rocking chairs in the big front window. Presently the Bradey car passed up the street. Gorman was not inclined to discount Bradey too heavily, but the man seemed less dangerous since the girl's revelation. It was plain that he was to a certain extent under Moore's thumb. That he did not entirely enjoy his position was shown, Gorman fancied, by Bradey's drinking. It might be one of his vices, but the sheriff was inclined to fancy it a sign of weakness and of worry. Still, he did not mean to count him too cheaply. Unless he had the goods on him, he would have a hard job to outwit Bradey. He was not likely to indulge in the rough end of things. His methods were less crude than Moore's, but his whole nature was warped, selfish, sinister.

Gorman's face was not pleasant in its sternness as he watched the car pass. A man who would deliberately sell his ward—for the price of her own inheritance—deliver her to a half-breed villain like Moore was not to be described in adequate terms. Yet Gorman held a fancy in the back of his head that Bradey was not actually contemplating this thing, that he had placed himself in a position with Moore from which he hoped to extricate himself by the use of his wits and the temporary stalling of the man he styled his foreman.

Moore, Gorman was inclined to think, was suspicious of Bradey and had come to the B-in-a-box more from choice than invitation, intending to stick close to Bradey until division was made. The sight of the girl had aroused his crude desire for her.

After a few minutes of quiet smoking, Gorman walked down the street to the drug store where he made some purchases, then to the newspaper office where he borrowed an article from the foreman of the composing room under seal of secrecy.

"Reg'lar detective stuff, eh?" asked the latter in a confidential whisper.

"Something like that. I'll let you folks have the story hot off the griddle."

He was not sure that the paper would be in favor of printing the story he intended bringing about. They were inclined to favor Bradey, but this they could not ignore. If things worked out there would be few papers that would not run the details.

Time was a strong element and he left the mare at home, hiring his usual car and speed out to the Two-Bar, not forgetting to buy some things at the grocery store for the Jordans. The last thing he did before leaving town and closing his office, bereft of Pete, was to take the farm newspaper from the safe and the gun that Dave Lorton had loaned to Curly from his desk.

He found Bud Jarrett with two of his men working on repairs to his corral, getting ready for the branding after the fall round-up. Jarrett did not seem surprised to see him. Gorman surmised that the girl had managed to telephone.

"I've a notion Bradey's gettin' ready to play even with you for showin' over

to Jordan's," said the sheriff. "Likewise Moore."

Jarrett nodded. Mary White had conveyed the warning to him, and, when he tried to dismiss it, being young, sure of his own powers to take care of himself and not willing to suggest to Mary any inability in that line, she, like a wise young woman, said nothing of her talk with the sheriff. Nor did Gorman intend to mention it.

"Bradey won't try enny gunplay," said Gorman. "He's too slick. An' Moore ain't shootin' right good these days. I'm ridin' a hunch that they'll try to drive off some of yore steers. They've got a brand-doctor with the outfit by the name of Dave Lorton. I'm acquainted more or less with the hombre an I know that's his specialty. When you bought the ranch you bought in the brand 'thout thinkin' of enny one fakin' it. Bradey owns five ranches rolled inter one an' also five brands: B-in-a-box, T-on-T, 9 U W, Lazy H an' Circle D. Put a stem top and bottom to yore bars an' you got the T on T. ⊥ Connect 'em up with one an' you got the Lazy H. ⊥ Easy for Dave who blacksmiths his own irons to suit the job.

"I don't claim Dave came here special for this, but he's one of Moore's crew an' Moore's bin runnin' a ranch over the State line for Bradey. Looks to me as if they've closed that up, now Moore's here as foreman.

"If you were to leave about thirty three-year olds somewheres handy near yore line fence, away from the rest of yore herd, as if you'd rounded 'em up for sale, why I wudn't be surprised but what Bradey's crowd wud annex 'em some dark night."

"Neither wud I. What's the idea, givin' Bradey over two thousand dollars?"

"See if you don't think it's a good one. Have you got the steers?"

"I've got 'em. I was thinkin' of makin' a shipment ennyway."

"How many hands you got?"

"Cowhands?"

"Yep."

"Five. Two here with me, two ridin' fence an' the other's gentlin' a colt."

"Good." Gorman suspected the gentled colt was later to become the property of Mary White. "Trust 'em to keep their mouths shet?"

"You bet. They ain't feelin' kindly to Bradey. Sore they weren't in on the fuss at Jordan's. Wanted to cuss me out when I came back with a sticky shirt and a skinned rib."

"All right. Git the three that's handy. Loan me a cowhawss an' I'll help. Got some place we can herd these steers while we rope an' throw 'em that none of Bradey's outfit cud look into? I've an idea they're keepin' an eye on yore place."

"There's a box cañon we cud put 'em into. Reg'lar hide out. But——"

"I'll explain. Come inter the house."

When they emerged Jarrett regarded the sheriff with something like awe.

"How in time you come to think of that beats me?" he said.

"I didn't think of it. Hombre that wrote the article thought of it."

"It's a whizzer. Let's go."

In five minutes the little cavalcade of five horsemen were loping to where Jarrett's three-year olds were grazing. All of them had lariats and tie ropes. Gorman had traded his own Stetson for an ancient broadbrim that flopped over his face. He borrowed a gaudy neckerchief and, on a strange cowpony, it was not likely that he would be recognized even if some one were watching. And he was highly necessary at the ceremony that followed the roping and hog tieing of the indignant steers.

All five were experts—so were the horses—and, while no records were broken, no steer took longer than five minutes to overhaul and rope and tie

ready for Gorman. There were twenty-six of them, fine animals worth seventy-five dollars each on the hoof, no small portion of Jarrett's possessions. Divided by five men's work the whole performance was over in an hour. Gorman's part of it took less than two minutes to a beef. Nothing like it had ever before been witnessed on a range. The riders joked and laughed, but, when they saw the results, they turned their jests to whistles of surprise.

"It beats my time," said a grizzled veteran. An' me bin punchin' cows fo' thirty-six year an' never noticed it. She's a humdinger!"

They had roped off the narrow mouth of the cañon, but now they released and drove them to a corner of the line fence where there was good grazing and a spring, sure that they would not stray.

"There's the bait," said Gorman as they left them contentedly feeding. "If Bradey swallers it I've got him landed."

"That scheme of yores wud sure be recommended by the Humane Society an' the cranks what say how crewel it is to notch a ca'fs ears an' brand a cow. The same kind that used to check-rein their drivin' hawsses before they bought 'em flivvers," said the old cowboy. "But I can't see the bunch usin' it at a round-up. Make a reg'lar pink tea of it. She's sure a humdinger, though," he concluded with a shake of his head. "An' me punchin' for thirty-six years! I wouldn't have believed it if you hadn't shown me."

"I saw Bradey's niece—as they call her—in town to-day," Gorman said to Jarrett casually, when they were back at the ranch house. "She's sure a mighty nice appearin' gal. Reckon the hombre that gits her'll have to step some to deserve her."

Jarrett looked him straight in the eyes.

"That's the way I feel about it, Gorman," he said. "There's on'y one like her."

"I wudn't be surprised, Bud. Let me know if ennything happens. But keep clear of the steers yorese'f. Good luck to you."

He drove on to the Jordan cabin with the results of his afternoon's work carefully stowed away. As an experiment it had been more startlingly successful than he had anticipated. There would be no need for further tests, but he intended to make some with the doctor as assistant. Suddenly he grinned to himself, remembering the tag of the telegram he had received from the commissioner regarding the B-in-a-box boundaries. The official had stated his intention of coming to Vacada within a day or so.

"That cinches it," said Gorman aloud. "I'll git him lined up with a demonstration. If Bradey only holds off from takin' that bait for two or three days now we cudn't ask for ennything prittier."

Pete, recognizing the car, was outside the cabin to meet him.

"Things goin' all right," he said in answer to Gorman's question. Right as they kin. The woman's worryin' erbout her man. Her kid's gittin' better, all over the cold except the snuffles now. The other kid's a bear. So's the sick one, I reckon when she's O. K. They both got an idea I'm some sort of bumble-puppy you sent up for their amusement," he grumbled, his eyes belying his words. "Jake's comin' erlong. He ain't got enny idea I'm a deputy. I took off my star when I'm handlin' him—might git him feverish."

"He ain't under arrest, Pete."

"Wal, I'm bettin' he's been doin' things that might make him think he was, if he saw my badge. Talks some when he's delirious. You patch 'em together an' you sabe there's bin a killin' an' he's mixed up in it. He's on'y a kid an' it's on his conscience though, when he's conscious, he figgers it ain't manly to have sich an article.

"Out of his fever now an' through ravin'. But he's worried becos the woman here is so good to him. Make what you kin out of that. Give him a few days an' he'll come clean to her, mebbe. Mebbe he won't. That all sounds like *I* was ravin', but, if you cud watch his eyes when she comes in to do somethin' fo' him, you'd see what I meant.

"Soon after he come-to he asks where he was. I told him he was in Jordan's shack an' Mrs. Jordan was givin' up her bed to him so he cud be easy an' git well in quick time. You shud have seen the way he looked then, chief. Like a dawg that's done wrong an' knows it an' gits given a bone 'stead of a kick. Then he shoves his face in the piller an' stays that way."

"If he or the crowd he was with had killed Sam Jordan, that wud tie it up?" asked Gorman.

"It sure wud. That's what I was figgerin'. I don't think this kid did the shootin', but he was mixed up in it an' bein' a kid, as I say, he ain't hard all through."

Gorman nodded. Here was endorsement of the hunch he had been riding ever since first Dave Lorton and then Bradey had shown such special interest in the gun he had taken from Curly. He went on into the cabin.

Mrs. Jordan met him, talking low.

"He's sleeping inside," she said.

"Got yore only bedroom? How are you makin' out? I told Pete to bunk in the barn."

"We are comfortable enough out here in the big room," she said. "Sheriff, I want to ask you about my husband. When did he leave the money for those groceries and why didn't he bring them back with him?"

"Suppose we sit down, marm," suggested Gorman, his face grave. Both the children were playing outside in the sunshine with Pete, the deputy taking the role of a bucking bronco, an elephant, a railroad engine and an automobile with a swiftness of change that would have put the star jinni of the "Arabian Nights" to shame.

"I can't place yore husband in Vacada," he said. "You had enough on yore mind last time I saw you without enny more worry. But you got to face it. I sent up the stuff from the store, seein' you were tied up here an' cudn't do yore own orderin'. Brought a few more things to-day. You kin pay me back for 'em some day, if you want to."

He drew out the Colt with the pitted barrel and the rust spot on the muzzle and showed it to her.

"Know it?" he asked her. She took it and turned it about in her hands with her face turning chalky white. Then she put it on the table.

"It's Sam's gun," she said, her face working. "He bought it second-handed and cheap because of that rust mark. They've murdered him."

Suddenly her head went down on her arms on the table and her back shook with the sobs that racked her. Gorman looked at her in pitying silence that he knew would convey to her the fact that he believed she had spoken truly. He knew her kind—the Western frontierswoman, fighting all odds beside her mate to make a home out of the wilderness for themselves and their children. True pioneers, true Americans, striking out for themselves and building up the country, battling poverty and the unkindly elements.

She would face her grief presently, take up the added burden bravely.

He left her and went into the inner room. Jake lay asleep. Despite his tan his face was pallid, dark pits under the eyes, the cheeks a little pinched. He was about the same age as the rider named Curly, lads both, easily led. The down on his cheeks showed soft in the sunlight. There was no look of the hardness in the sleeping face that it wore when the boy was awake and well,

striving to live up to the favor of Moore, imagining himself a reckless, dare-devil buckaroo.

CHAPTER VII.

GORMAN had sympathy in his gaze, though the eyes the boy looked into when he awoke were hard as steel. Jake summoned up his own spirit of bravado to meet them.

"Mornin', sheriff," he said with a weak attempt at jauntiness. "You lookin' for me?"

"Not this mornin', Jake. Fur as the rumpus we had yestiddy stands we'll call it square if you're willin'. You were helpin' to run a woman an' her two kids off the place they were livin' in, whether they happened to own it rightful or not. Moore told you they didn't. I'm tellin' you, as sheriff, that it's her property an' never was Bradey's. Aside from all that, if I'd bin tryin' to run off a helpless woman an' a couple of kids, with the husband an' father lyin' off somewhere with a bullet in him, I'd feel I'd got off easy with one through my lungs, knowin' I was goin' to git well, with a doctor waitin' on me an' good quarters in the house of the woman whose man ain't comin' back to her agen. That's the way I'd feel erbout it, Jake."

Jake's lips twitched, his eyes showed suddenly as if they had been bruised when the sheriff mentioned the father lying off with a bullet in him, never to come back again. Then he closed them.

Gorman took out the gun which he had taken from the table and put back in his pocket. He held it in front of Jake and touched him on the shoulder.

"Got somethin' to show you," he said and, as the rider opened his eyes again, he shot the question at him.

"Ever see this gun before? I just showed it to the woman in there—to Sam Jordan's widder. She recognized it, Jake."

For a fleeting second there was terror in Jake's eyes. Then they grew hard and bright, his boyish jaw clamped stubbornly before and after his answer.

"Seen lot's like it."

"This ain't quite the same as other guns, Jake. Sabe the rust spot? Makes it easy to remember. I'll tell you where I got it. Off of Curly. It ain't the one Curly was wearin' the other morning when I shot it out of his hand. He ses that one cuts lead. Mebbe it does. I hit it on the cylinder. Then he got funny with this one an' I took it away from him. Dave ses he loaned it to him, which was a kindly act—mebbe. Dave was all-fired anxious to git it back. So was Bradey. Came inter town special to git it. Not such a good gun, either. Barrel's pitted an' there's a dent in the sight. But it's mighty vallyble to some one. I think Dave was loco to pass it on to Curly, though no doubt he thought it was a foxy move.

"It's Jordan's gun, Jake. I wonder if he got a chance to use it. He used to share this bed you're in with his widder. Wudn't wonder if the two orphan kiddies were born here. If I knew ennything erbout how he come to lose thet gun, Jake, even if I was the one who did the killin'—I'd sure feel like a skunk if I didn't come through. That is if I was bein' taken care of by the widder. 'Why, he's on'y just a boy,' she said to me. Lookin' out for you like you was her son 'stead of bein' what you are. I wudn't wonder but what she's prayed for you to git well."

The inquisition was almost merciless. It was plain that he had reached through to the very soul of Jake and that he was in torment. But between the wounded cowboy and the woman sobbing out her heart in the next room, while her children played in the sun with Pete, unconscious of the fact that they were orphans—for Gorman had no doubt of Jordan's murder—the sheriff did not hesitate to put the question.

"There's some hombres," went on Gorman, "who figger they've never got to give away their pals. But Moore an' Dave Lorton ain't pals to enny one but themselves. Dave slipped this gun to Curly an' when the kid let that fact out, Dave wud have killed him if his eyes had bin knives. You come clean, Jake."

Jake's face set. The boyishness vanished.

"I don't sabe what you're talkin' erbout," he said stubbornly.

"All right, Jake. You got quite a while to stay here. You think it over."

Jake set his bent arm across his face, his obstinate jaw showing under it. Presently Gorman went out.

"The kid's got guts," he told himself. "On'y he's started wrong. Thinks he'd be yeller to give 'em away. An' he's likely not overanxious to tell a sheriff how he's mixed up in it. But I'm bettin' he'll come through."

Mrs. Jordan raised her tear-stained face as he reëntered the room. She got up, wiping her eyes with her apron.

"You'll bring him back to me," she said. "When you find him."

"Yes marm. There's a chance or so he ain't dead, of course."

"No," she said stonily. "I've known he was dead for days. I'm sure of it. But I want what's left of my man—and I want to see the men that murdered him hung for it."

Her voice was flat, but there was passion in it, the passion of a woman robbed of her mate, firm for revenge.

Gorman nodded. Without finding the body any case for murder would fall to the ground. Short of the confession of some one who saw the deed it would be hard to discover. The corpse might be buried.

"I'll do my best," he said simply. It was a strange and harsh situation, the wounded rider who could not be moved without losing his life, tended by a woman bitter and merciless in the face of her tragedy yet sorry for the lad who had been ranged—at least—with her husband's killers.

"I don't blame the kid for not comin' through so fur," he reflected as he left the cabin. "He wudn't tell her. He cudn't. She'd cut his throat if he did, way she's feelin' now. But there ain't much fear of that an' he may come clean to Pete. He's sure feelin' like a sick coyote right now.

"Hello, kiddies! What you got there?"

"A nelefunt," said the youngest child, prodding Pete with a stick. Git up, nelefunt."

"He ain't a very good specimen," said Gorman gravely. "Not much pep. Too bad you ain't got some peanuts to feed him. I wonder——" he put his hand in his pocket. "I'll be hornswoggled," he cried, "if I ain't got some with me. And some candy. Ain't that lucky? Don't give him too many peanuts. His stummick ain't very good. An' don't give him enny of the candy. Here."

The children squealed with delight and the candy released Pete from bondage.

"Keep 'em outside till she comes for 'em, Pete," said Gorman. "I've told her. I got hold of her husband's gun. Dave Lorton had it. I've left it in the bedroom. She'll likely ask for it after a bit, but, if you git a chance, you pick it up when Jake's awake an' wonder where it come from. Sabe? I've had a chat with him.

"You keep that star of yores in yore pocket. He may come through. If he starts to, you kin warn him, to make it legal. If he makes up his mind to talk that won't stop him. It never does. Every time she does ennything for him he'll hate himself worse. He's goin' to be one of our best bets, Pete. They don't dare take him away, but we won't give 'em a chance. That's one reason why you're here, Pete. If they took a

notion he was goin' to spill, they might try to finish him up. I wudn't put it past 'em. You better git a li'l sleep days an' none nights, Pete. In a day or so I'll have somethin' else for 'em to think erbout."

"Somethin' stirrin'?"

"I've started somethin', Pete."

"An' me not goin' to be in it!"

"You've got yore job right here, Pete. Now you be a nelefunt an' git yore peanuts."

"I'd a sight ruther have some chewin'. I'll be out afore long."

"I'll bring you up a plug of Star termorrer or nex' day. Got to go now."

It was dark before he reached town and turned in the car. The same evening he showed the doctor the results of his experiment with the steers and told what he had done to bait Bradey. The doctor exclaimed over the showing and Gorman unfolded his plan for a demonstration before the commissioner.

That came off two days later when the land official arrived for his monthly hearing. He went to the dairy under protest of limited time and came away astonished.

"You're going to take that up with the cattleman's association, I suppose," he said. "It should be mighty valuable."

"After I'm through with it," said Gorman. "Meantime, I'm keepin' it dark. I'm hopin' for a rustlin' bee to be pulled off most every night an' I've used this idea in connection."

"I see," said the commissioner, though he only saw vaguely. "I'm not curious," though he was, "and I'll keep this demonstration quiet, of course. But it's remarkable—and eminently scientific. There should be no doubt as to its being court evidence."

"That's what I'm lookin' for."

"I understood you had done away with the rustlers hereabouts," went on the commissioner, "but I suppose it will break out occasionally. They've had an epidemic of it the other side of the State line lately. I was talking with their commissioner last week. They suspected the man who ran a ranch quite close to the line. But they couldn't pin anything on him. The steers were run off in comparatively small lots and either sent out of the State, or, as some of the losers thought, they were rebranded and that so cleverly they couldn't swear to it. The brands were not blotted, but doctored in such a way that there were no fresh burn scars showing. Cs changed into Os, an L T into a box and so on. Identification is a hard matter—or was. Your plan upsets such tricks."

"Should, if you kin git 'em to take it up," said Gorman. "What was the name of the suspected ranch, an' who run it?"

"A man by the name of Moore. It was a ranch with a registered brand that I have forgotten for the moment—no—I have it—I noted it because of the irony S O S. Moore was a cattle buyer, which would account for his having different brands on the cattle he was handling. A smart scheme, if he was crooked. As I say, they couldn't pin anything on him, but they made it so uncomfortable for him that he cleared out. Sold or drove out. Matter of fact he was invited to leave. They didn't like his style."

"Man name of Moore is foreman for King Bradey right now," said Gorman dryly, watching the commissioner. "Come quite recent. Brought erlong a few hands. They're all workin' fo' Bradey. Hombre by the name of Dave Lorton with 'em. He's bin in trubble for fakin' brands. Bradey's a cattle buyer, too," he added as if aimlessly. "But I sure aim to put down all rustlin' in this county, no matter who's behind it, commissioner."

"Quite right, sheriff," the commissioner said hastily. "You get the goods on the rustlers and then do your duty."

"I aim to. You see, I've got no votes botherin' me. I ain't aimin' for another term an' the governor's backin' me."

"Yes. Exactly. You're in a strong position. Very fortunate. I've been very interested in what you showed me, Gorman. I must get back to my hearings. I have to leave to-night."

Demonstrating to the commissioner was a good stroke. He could be used as a witness. He had expressed his opinion in front of the doctor. He was committed. And he would undoubtedly stand from under if he thought Bradey was going to fall.

The information he had unwittingly give made Gorman see the reason for Moore's joining forces and the need for a clean-up. The S O S ranch had outlived its usefulness as a receiving and forwarding station. Sooner or later Moore's presence would be generally known and the suspicion with which he was tainted spread to Bradey, who had carefully operated under cover, so far.

There was the mystery of Jordan to determine, but Gorman let that ride until he heard from Jarrett. Then general action would clear up many matters, he believed. And he was busy with other duties in Vacada.

The next morning the telephone rang in his office at six o'clock. Bud Jarrett's voice came vibrantly over the line.

"They've gone," he said. "I ain't started to trail 'em till I told you. What's the next move?"

"I'll be out as soon as I kin. Wait till I git there. We'll git you back yore steers, but they'll be branded Lazy H, unless we've played this all wrong."

CHAPTER VIII.

GORMAN had made his plans. It was not going to be an easy matter to arrest King Bradey, Moore, and Dave Lorton. He did not contemplate arresting the whole outfit. Bradey could muster at least fifty riders. Jarrett's steers had to be returned after they had been discovered rebranded on the B-in-a-box holding, with whatever other evidence they could find. Also the few that belonged to Mrs. Jordan. Some of the steers were of Bradey's own raising. If these could be segregated in any way they would represent the interest of Mary White, which the sheriff intended to try and protect. There would be the claims of the ranchers from the neighboring State to be taken up eventually.

Bradey, thinking his depredations thoroughly covered, would not tamely submit to judgment. He would realize that it meant the unmasking of all his operations and he would fight, at first with force and then through the courts, if he could bring his influence to bear. The last possibility did not bother Gorman. He would have evidence that would be overwhelming, aside from the raid on the Jordan place. Bradey, indicted for stealing cattle, perhaps for complicity in a murder, would find his influence melting like snow under the sun.

Gorman busied himself at the telephone, calling up ranch after ranch. At a few he got in touch with the owners, at each he left urgent messages to be delivered to them at the earliest moment. All knew him personally, and his reputation. They knew that he would not summon them lightly and the word rustlers brought them into swift action.

This was a matter for horses and Gorman saddled the black mare. He had made a rendezvous for two o'clock at a spot midway between Vacada and the Two-Bar. He himself was there ahead of time and soon small bands began to arrive. In most cases these consisted of owners, their foremen and two or three riders, all with their cartridge belts girded about them, ready for fight. A few brought rifles in saddle sheaths.

At a few minutes after two there was no more dust in sight. And there were no absentees. Gorman harangued them briefly. He told them of Moore's activity in the neighboring State, of his connection with Bradey and the running off of Jarrett's steers. Also the graver matter of Sam Jordan. And he sketched lightly the position of Bradey's ward. They listened soberly. The eldest of them, proprietor of the X-bar-X, a man whose hair was gray though his body and mind were still vigorous, glancing at the others, made himself their spokesman.

"We know you wouldn't bring us out on a fool's errand, Gorman," he said, "and I don't doubt but that you'll make out a case, but the one thing you've got is the theft of these steers. If they were taken last night and blanket-branded, with an easy change from Two-Bar to Lazy H, how are you goin' to prove up on 'em? Jarrett may be willin' to swear to 'em, but that sort of identification don't go in court. It can be all balled up by a good examinin' lawyer."

"If you all'll go with me to locate the steers, I'll guarantee the identification," said Gorman. "I'm stakin' my word an' reputation it'll be satisfactory to all of you. I'm figgerin' they'll have 'em tucked away for a few days, but we don't want to run enny chance of havin' 'em mixed with his main herd. It 'ud take some time then, mebbe, to pick 'em out, if they were with other Lazy H's, but we cud do it even then. I've got the goods with me, in my slicker. If you-all will take my word for it, it'll save a heap of time an' I might waste a lot of it persuadin' you away from the steers. I guarantee the identification. I'm swearin' you all in as voluntary deputies."

"That goes," said the speaker. "I'm willin' to ride blind on yore say-so, Gorman, an' I reckon the others will. You've got this county clean an' most of us have got you to thank for savin' us cattle an' money. We aim to keep it clean an' if Bradey's bin runnin' a rankyboo on us, he goes. It's the steers we're after."

The rest gathered round Gorman, lifting their right hands as he swore them in. Then they started for the Two-Bar, the hoofs of the horses thudding softly as they loped through sage and mesquite for the highlands, quiet and determined, in a cloud of alkali.

A clever brand-fakir, using a damp blanket through which to brand, can produce a mark on the animal's hide that so closely approximates the healed-over scars of the original branding that it cannot be positively detected.

This was in the minds of all of them as they rode, but they had implicit confidence in Gorman, heading the bunch with the old rancher who had accepted his judgment and who rode as young as any of them, his face set as he brooded over what he had been told. Now and then he addressed a short question to the sheriff, but he made no further reference to the matter of identification, puzzled though he was beyond his experience.

Gorman had deferred his explanation not merely to save time, but because he realized that these were men used to old-time methods and that, without actual demonstration, many of them would treat his new method with ridicule and jesting argument. That was not the mood in which he wanted to lead them.

They found Jarrett at the Two-Bar gate. His five riders were with him. If he felt any surprise at the cavalcade he gave no sign, but greeted them cordially. Nor did he show any signs of the occasional doubts that had assailed him as to the recovery of the cattle. He had put up a big stake, but he was playing for a bigger one. With Bradey ready to ruin him to prevent his marriage with Mary White and to

get even for his interference in the Jordan raid, with a scamp like Moore living at the B-in-a-box, it did not need a lover's intuition to suggest the danger to the girl, which would be ended by this day's work.

"I've found where the wire was cut," he said. "Didn't suppose you'd object to that, Gorman. And it'll save some time."

"All right. Show it to us, Bud."

They reached the severed wire and Gorman halted them on the Two-Bar side of it. He ran his eyes over the crowd of thirty-three men and picked out four he knew had ability to read sign as he could. It was already plain in the gap for an expert, crushed grass and sage and the prints of cattle and of horses.

"They'll run 'em over rock, sooner or later," he said. "We'll have to fan out. This was the old T-on-T. North is the Circle D. Any of you know the lay of the land?"

Three men spoke up and they held a consultation, drawing little maps in the soft dirt as they talked.

"Both those ranch houses are closed up," said one of them. "Bradey keeps some men over to the Lazy H quarters with a cook. The rest eat an' bunk to B-in-a-box."

"Circle D house an' corrals are in Stone Cañon," said Gorman, who was familiar with the country though he had not ridden it for some time and was always willing to use the knowledge of others. "Seems likely Dave 'ud put 'em in a corral. But we'll foller sign."

For a while they had no trouble, but the trail curved off to reach a wide stretch of outcrop on which the hooves had left no mark. Yet here and there first one and then another "cut" the sign. A fragment of rock recently shaled off, cattle droppings once and horse droppings again, the burned end of a match, once the butt of a cigarette caught in a projection of the rock, the fragment of burned paper still fluttering.

"Ought to have had more sense than to smoke," said Gorman with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. "Try the draw to the right, two of you, I'll tackle the one ahead."

Time and again, with infinite perseverance, they regained the trail, though much ingenuity had been used in the attempt to cover it. But the rustlers had worked at night when they could not see what sign they might be leaving for trained and vigilant observers. At last they topped a ridge and looked over the range of the old Circle D. Five miles away showed the mouth of the cañon where the ranch headquarters had been deserted. The buildings and corral were hidden. A stream ran out of it, twisting toward them over fairly level terrain, known as a park.

The sign was clear. They stopped for a moment to breathe their horses. Gorman, scanning the country, caught sight of a horseman appearing for a moment as he crossed a crest.

"They've spotted us," he said. "First time, I imagine, or he wudn't have taken a chance of showin' himself. There may be more, or he may have bin left on guard. If the steers are there, they can't move 'em. But he may be cuttin' to B-in-a-box for help. They know what we're after. Better tighten cinches. I may not have time to make that proof to you all. I take it you're still acceptin' my word fo' it. Jarrett, you want to drive 'em back with yore men if we run inter trubble?"

"No," said Jarrett shortly. "I want to know the steers are there an' that we've got the goods on Bradey. Then I'm goin' on to the B-in-a-box."

"I understand, Bud," said Gorman. Jarrett meant the girl. "Who'll do that for Jarrett? You, Hayes?"

"Why pick on me?" drawled Hayes, leaner by far than Gorman, his long

legs almost ludicrous in comparison to the pony he rode. "Don't I git none of the fun?"

"You may git more'n the rest of us," said Gorman. "We'll try an' git you away clear. Will you do it? *Bueno!* This ain't goin' to be a picnic, gents. Better tighten up yore cinches an' then we'll ride like hell."

There was something ominous about the band of horsemen streaming over the plain in silence, racing at top speed, the bellies of their horses brushing the grass tops. They spread out, expectant that any moment might see the issuance of a bunch of steers escorted by the riders of B-in-a-box, prepared for battle. That anticipation faded as they rapidly neared the opening of the cañon, wide at the entrance, but narrowing and curving like a boomerang. It was a grim sight for any guards and watchers of Bradey to note the swift approach. No man called or shouted, each sat clamped to his saddle, reins in one hand, gun in the other. Gorman's reins were on his horn, the black mare guided by his knees and there was a weapon in each hand.

He entered the cañon a little ahead of the rest. It was shady from the slowly westering sun. There came the zip of a high powered bullet, sent from the right and above, burying itself with a spurt of dust in the ground. Either a warning or a shot fired in the hope of picking off the leader.

Necessarily they closed in as the ravine narrowed. At a second shot a man swayed in the saddle. The missile had struck the horn and richocheted from the steel core to plough through the thigh, above the bone.

"I kin still ride," he said. "I'll make a turniquet in a minnit. But I'll git that sneakin' sniper."

Rifles were slid from their sheaths by those who carried them as they swept on. The buildings came into sight, then the corrals. They could see movement of cattle through the high bars. No more shots came. The sniper had been left out of range, or he waited for reinforcements.

"There they are," said Jarrett. "Mine fo' a million! The number's O. K.," he said as the gate was opened.

The steers were uneasy. In a corner of the corral smoke rose from a little pile of ashes.

"Dave's brandin'-fire," said Gorman.

"Hard thing to swear to Herefords," said Jarrett, "but Gorman's turned that trick. Look at the brandin'. All Lazy H's an' damned smart work, if it is on my own steers."

"It was hard to differentiate between the cleverly added stem between the two bars of Jarrett's brand, done with a running iron forged for the occasion; dulled marks that in a day or two would be absolutely indistinguishable from the real thing. One of the men found a fragment of scorched blanketing that had been thrown into the fire, but saved by a twist of wind.

The man shot through the leg, a ranch owner, had slipped off quietly with one of his men. Both carried rifles. He had bandaged his leg roughly and his face showed a grim determination to get even. He was the most famous deer hunter in the county, and, when Gorman missed him he fancied that the sharpshooter was going to regret his marksmanship.

The steers were rounded up, the bit of blanket preserved by Gorman. Hayes took charge of the cattle with his men and the rest formed an escort to see them safely across the plain and down a draw that might favor an ambuscade. Past that in safety they had a fair chance of getting through without trouble. But the steers went slowly, herded securely enough by so many men, and beyond doubt men were racing from the Lazy H by short cuts, already on the way, and others coming from the farther B-in-a-box. Bradey

would fight to prove his honesty, though he must soon know that the countryside had joined against him.

What Gorman did not know was that Bradey had received a telephone from the commissioner, a short and guarded message before he went to his train.

"There's trouble, King, about a man you've got by the name of Moore. News came from the next State and things are stirring. This is the best I can do for you, King, you'll have to dry your own fish."

So that Bradey and Moore, were not unprepared for the news brought them by a galloping messenger on a foundered horse. Later by phone from the quarters at Lazy H.

"Is Lorton there?" Bradey asked, in answer to the second message, troubled by the first, though he did not show it. The brand-doctor came to the phone.

"Get through with your job?" asked Bradey.

"Yep. But they've smelled a rat. There's hell to——"

Bradey shut him off. He went outside on the veranda to Moore. He had already told the foreman of the commissioner's friendly but limited tip.

"The branding's finished," he said. "They can't prove a damned thing if Dave's done a good job. We'll make 'em smart for this. Jump 'em. Now's the chance for you to even up your scores, Moore. Wipe out that damned sheriff while they're on our land."

"The jig's up," said Moore. "Or it's spilled enough not to keep on dancin', ennyway. I say clear." He took a long drink from the handy bottle.

"Cut that stuff," said Bradey. "What do you mean to do? Quit? Leave the stock an' run, you damned coward?"

"I'm no coward," said Moore. "But I'm not a fool. You kin stay if you want to. Take yore ha'f out in the stock if you're so blamed sure of holdin' them. I'm goin' to take what you've got in yore safe an' a check fo' the rest. I'll chance yore stoppin' the check. I've got what was in my bank. I'm goin' with the boys to git a crack at that sheriff an' then I'm goin' to start out on my own. More'n that, I'm takin' the gal."

Above them Mary White listened from her open window. She slipped back and hurried, but softly went down the stairs. She had on her riding things. At the foot of the stairs she met Pedro. His greasy face wore a half smile. The two men could be heard quarreling on the veranda and Pedro had gleaned his own information and made up his mind as to his procedure. He was a believer in the star of King Bradey, but he inclined, in his greaser way, toward the decision of Moore.

"Where you go?" he asked.

He stood in front of her and she struck him fiercely with her quirt and ran out. Pedro went through the house to the veranda.

"Double crossin' me, were you?" demanded Moore fiercely. "Stallin' me erlong? Don't forgit what I can pass across to let you in deeper than a bogged cow!"

Bradey grasped the bottle that was on the small table where they had been sitting before the telephone rang. Moore's hand dropped to his gun as Pedro appeared.

"Mary, she go," said the cook.

Moore exploded an oath and leaped the porch rail. Bradey had no gun with him and he went inside for one. Moore ran for his horse, standing saddled, as the girl, low in her saddle, quirting her pinto pony, sped between two buildings. Moore vaulted to the saddle and raced in pursuit as Bradey came out. There was no horse up for him. He seldom rode and he was not a good horseman. He stood impotent, the pair already out of sight. He was between two fires.

Not for the first time he regretted his partnership with Moore. Not for the first time had Moore threatened to turn on him and it was while he devised means of checking him that he permitted him to think he would consent to his capture of Mary White.

Bradey had not much soul that was not numb with selfishness, but what there was left of it that was decent rose against such a mating. But he had his hand in a dog's mouth and a bite was fatal.

Now indeed it looked as if the jig was up, but he had to make a fight of it, rally his friends, ward off trial until he could escape, leaving bail behind if he had to. Moore might split. He had a fair share of the spoils in hand, all he would get.

Bradey set up a clamor on the wagon tire that summoned the men, and, as they came in, those of them who were not out on various duties, he chose two of his own and despatched them after Moore and the girl.

"Get him," he said savagely, taking them apart. If she don't want to come back, let her go," he added wearily. It looked as if the jig was up, but he was a fighter for his own, illicitly gathered or not. He supposed the girl would go to Jarrett. And he had no time now for Jarrett.

The two men started away. Bradey turned toward the others.

"Gorman, Jarrett, and some sort of posse are taking away those steers in the Circle D corral," he said briefly. "The boys there are after them, but they're in force. Hop to it."

In five minutes the place was clear of them. They imagined the two already despatched were on some special errand and they rode hard toward the Circle D, tangenting to cut off the posse, keen enough for a fight, realizing that their own liberties might be in danger, but sure of Bradey's judgment.

Bradey went heavily into the house, taking with him the whisky from the porch. He drank a full glass of it and it warmed him and stirred him out of a sluggishness that had invested him. He started taking papers from his safe, destroying some of them, putting the rest back and closing the steel box. Then he busied himself with long-distance calls.

Mary White, looking back, saw Moore in pursuit. Her mount was fresh and fast and she rode well. Instinctively she made for the Two-Bar. It would be dark before she reached there, and, if they had not returned, she might lose Moore in the hills. At the last she had her automatic.

And Moore settled down in his saddle, determined to reach her, to take his will of her, to force her to go with him, or, perhaps, to leave her. Possess her he would. The man was instinct with evil. He cast aside his revenge on the sheriff—he was done with sheriffs—not with Jarrett. With the latter he was resolved to have a devilish accounting through the girl.

Then he would ride on, down to Mexico. From there he would send in information enough to the authorities to put Bradey behind the bars. He had enough money on him with which to enjoy life until he wanted to start in afresh, marauding along the line.

Behind him followed the two riders from B-in-a-box. They were well mounted and they picked up the trail, then lost it. They rode to the top of a hogback, but the twisting contours of the hills hid the pursued. One of them threw his leg across the saddle and rolled a cigarette.

"Old man seemed riled," he said. "Sorter worried, at that."

"Sure did. Had a row with Moore."

"Wanted us to git him. Al, if they've split, there's goin' to be a bust up. He drawed our money three days ago. I've got an itch to drift away from here. If Gorman's out, there's

goin' to be big trubble. It don't look good to me. I've got most of my pay. How erbout you?"

"Most of it. Won some at poker last night. You've got a long head on you. Me, I'm not achin' to git rounded up by Gorman. We're all in it."

"Not so deep as Dave. He was with Moore when they got Jordan. An' Jake."

"Gorman'll attend to Dave Lorton. They've got Jake."

"I reckon so. Let's make the Old Man a present of three day's pay. I got a hunch we wudn't ever git it. What do you say, Al, shall we drift?"

"Let's go north. They won't bother erbout us none if we ain't on the spot. I know where they'll take us on. At the I X L. Allus lookin' for hands round this time o' year."

Through the twilight they drifted north. Once they heard the faint sound of firing and grinned at each other. That they had left the rest of the outfit at war with the law was little to them. There are some kinds of rats that are always first up the gangway and the first to go down. They showed a species of wisdom. And the I X L was a ranch where men worked hard for their money.

CHAPTER IX.

MARY rode south. She neither gained nor lost. She tried to be brave, but fear was in her heart. Not so much for herself, though she sensed something fiendishly implacable in Moore's pursuit, but for her lover. Presently she heard a distant mutter of shots. If the Two-Bar was deserted she would have to go on until darkness that seemed so long in coming though she could see the sunset flaming over the western hills. There was no other place near except Jordan's cabin. On they rode and Moore seemed to be creeping up. She urged her pony to better speed and he responded, then stumbled, a foot in a gopher hole. He got it out and seemed to go as well as ever, but presently commenced to go lame.

She began to have to hang on to her nerve. Back in the growing dusk Moore was getting closer. On and on with diminishing speed as the pinto was forced to favor the wrenched tendon. They came out of a pass on to the plateau where she could see the light burning in the Jordan house. She crouched forward on the withers of the pinto, riding like a jockey, coaxing, urging. Now she could hear the thud of Moore's horse coming up fast behind.

She raised the quirt she always carried but never used, save as an ornament, for it was beaded by Indian work, and cut the pinto over the flanks. The gallant pony, stung and surprised, roused himself to a short burst of speed. She was close to the door when it opened and a man came out. Dread that it was one of her uncle's riders swept over her and then she saw that this was not any one from the ranch, but a man once pointed out to her as Gorman's deputy. The same informant had told her that the man had been a great fighter in earlier days. He was old now.

He did not seem much of a rescuer, but the pinto's overtaxed tendon bowed and he fell to his knees. She slid off safely.

"What's wrong, miss?" asked Pete, peering at the oncoming rider.

"It's Moore," she gasped. "He's after me."

"You go inter the house," said Pete. "I'll tend to him."

She had a swift vision of the deputy standing bent forward at the hips, his pose tense. Then he flattened himself by the logs as Moore's gun flashed and roared. An answer stabbed out of the logs as she rushed in. Mrs. Jordan closed the door and the two women stood breathless while four—five shots rang out—then silence.

Then came a knock. Pete's voice.

"It's O. K.," he said.

They opened and he came in with blood running down from under his coat sleeve.

" 'Tain't but a scratch," he said with a grin. "He got in the first shot, but he's shootin' left-handed and he ain't good at it. It's saved the State the price of a rope—an' a trial."

"You killed him?"

"I sure did," said Pete nonchalantly. "Deader'n a squashed snake. You git me some hot water an' I'll wash myself a bit. Then I'll go in an' tell Jake. He might be glad to know, at that."

He came out of the bedroom half an hour later, his lined face earnest.

"The kid's come through," he said. "Marm, I ain't actin' as counsel for him, but I believe what he told me. It seems the kid was with Moore an' Dave Lorton when they killed yore husband. The kid had no idea they was goin' to do it till yore man told 'em they cud go to hell, when Moore warned him he on'y had a few days. Then Dave shot him. Dave took his gun. Later he passed it on to Curly, which is where he made a bad move. They made the kid in there help bury him."

"God!" The woman sat staring toward the door of the bedroom. Mary White put a hand on her arm.

"That shut the kid's mouth," said Pete. "Made him an accessory. But you was good to him an' Jim Gorman he had a talk with him. So did I. When he heard Moore was dead he came through. He's feelin' pritty bad."

"I hope I can forgive him," said Mrs. Jordan in a hard voice. "He can tell us where my Sam is buried." She choked a little. "I am sorry you shot Moore," she went on. But there's one left. I'll see him hang."

"I wudn't wonder," said Pete. "The chief is likely in touch with him by now. They've stopped firin' back in the hills." He looked at Mary, shook his head and went out into the night. He dragged the dead body of Moore, with two bullets through his heart, round the corner of the house, bit off a chew of tobacco and stood listening. After a while there was another spatter of gunfire. Then the silence of night as the bright stars came out.

The steers were well through the draw when the riders from the Lazy H attacked. Just before they appeared a single rifle shot sounded in the hills. The deerslayer had got his man. Fifteen riders of Bradey's came pouring over a hill and down the slope, firing as they came into range.

Gorman gave Hayes orders to push on with the steers and the rest of them wheeled to return the fire. The rifles emptied three of the saddles while the bullets from the revolvers still went wild. Then the shots began to tell. The rider next to Gorman went down and he shot the man who had fired, through the head. There was a rapid exchange until Gorman shouted an order and they charged the Bradey forces. Five of them were left behind when the others vanished over the hill. Three of these would never ride again. The two wounded were given in the charge of three of the posse who had been hurt and despatched after the steers. Then the sheriff led his horsemen up the hill.

The routed riders were spurring toward others coming from the B-in-a-box.

"Get after 'em," called Gorman. "Carry it to 'em. There ain't much light left for good shōotin'. You men with the rifles git up there to the right an' open on 'em. Don't believe they're goin' to stand, but there's two of 'em I want. Moore an' Dave Lorton. Bradey won't likely be erlong, he ain't much of a rider."

Moore was not destined to meet with Gorman that night. But Dave Lorton

was there with his hatchet face sharpened, his eyes shining like a wolf, a born killer, fighting against possible custody. It looked to him as if this posse that the newcomers said was made up of the best men roundabout were out for something more than mere rustling. He fancied himself the prime quarry.

Gorman sensed something of this in a general way when he said he thought they would not stand. The posse represented the law as typified by himself and it stood for something more, the arousing of public spirit that cannot be downed. The riders of the B-in-a-box had Dave for their only leader in the absence of Moore and of Bradey. That absence did not bolster their courage in the face of the feeling that they were in a losing game—outlawed. The sentiment that had made the two riders go north to the I X L was not entirely lacking from the rest. And when they saw the posse divide and come galloping in, bringing the fight to them, they wavered.

Rifle bullets began to sing among them, and found a mark or two. Then from the other side approached Gorman on the black, his guns ready, riding with his knees, ready to fire with deadly aim. Back of him almost a score of men who had order and law and justice backing them.

"Hands up!" shouted Gorman as they closed in. The riflemen had remounted and were attacking on the other side. Unless they ran, escaping, scattering in the gathering darkness, or surrendered, they would have to fight it out. Even if they won in this mêlée prices would be on their heads for any man to gather by capture or betrayal.

They answered the fire half heartedly, some of them, while others rode aside and held their arms high, reined up in a little group that the rest, surrounded, wounded and wounding like treed beasts, cursed at as they began to fall.

A man rode desperately out of the ruck and fired at Gorman. The sheriff swerved the mare as he saw the other's arm begin to rise and fired. He struck Curly in the shoulder with his bullet, mercifully.

"That kid sure has persistence," he said to himself as he galloped after another he had marked. Dave Lorton.

The B-in-a-box men were breaking up, those who still held their saddles or who had not given up the fight. The light was failing. In the dusk Dave Lorton fired to kill and missed though the bullet ran a tiny groove above the sheriff's ear. He pulled trigger again, wondering why Gorman did not shoot. The black mare was riding him off as he wheeled and rode with spurs sunk in his horse's flanks, reloading.

"Put 'em up, Dave!" cried the sheriff. For answer Lorton, three shells in his gun, twisted in his saddle. He was sure that Gorman's guns must be empty, both of them. Then he saw them spitting flame, left and right, left and right. His horse staggered and fell in its tracks, a bullet in its brain, its spine smashed. Dave Lorton fell headlong, looking up to see Gorman standing above him, covering him. Lorton had lost his gun. He was helpless.

"I sure hate to kill a good hawss, Dave," said Gorman grimly, "but I was bound to take you alive. I want to see you erbout that gun you gave Curly. Jake's come through," he added, using the old trick, not knowing that he prophesied confession.

The snarl on Dave's face convinced him that he had found Jordan's murderer.

"We won't bother erbout the brandfakin' charge this time, Dave," he said. "I've bin packin' a pair of handcuffs for you quite a while. We'll put 'em on."

They found Bradey in a lighted room, smoking an oily cigar. The reek of whisky was in the air, the fingers of his

hands closed and unclosed as he faced Gorman, one cheek red with the blood from his scalp wound, backed by stern-faced neighbors who had once looked up to the man they now came to take away with them to jail and judgment.

But Bradey fronted them.

"This sheriff of yours has led you into a nice mess, gentlemen," he said. "Why have you raided my cattle, marked with my brand, on a cock-and-bull story from Gorman? There'll be heavy damages to pay."

Jarrett pressed forward.

"Where's your niece?" he said. "And where's Moore?"

"Find one and you may find the other," Bradey barked. "I'll trim you yet, Jarrett. I'll break you."

"That's enough," said Gorman. "You'll have enough to tend to with yore own trubbles, Bradey. We've got the goods on you. You'd better tell us what you know erbout Moore an' the gal."

"I'll tell you nothing," said Bradey, and his jaw was set like a bulldog's. You'll all pay for this. I'll break the crowd of you. But I'm through talking."

Jarrett saw Pedro's face peering through the slide of the kitchen. He leaped through the door and caught the cook by the throat. When Pedro stammered the little he knew Jarrett flung him into a corner and rushed out. They heard the fast drumming of hoofs as he urged his tired horse. It was not till morning that he reached the Two-Bar looking for a fresh mount, his face lined and old, but stamped with indomitable resolution. And, as he rode out, passing the Jordan cabin, hardly seeing it, hardly knowing where he rode, a girl's voice called to him.

Bradey was not charged by Gorman with complicity in Jordan's murder. He was convinced that Bradey only wanted the gun to protect Dave, now beyond protection. But Bradey was confident of acquittal on the charge of stealing cattle. Moore was dead. There were no proofs. And he faced the trial, coming in from bail liberty to it, surrounded by attorneys, believing that he held the favor of the court. His chief counsel was affable, calculating on shattering the witnesses who might try to swear to the identity of the steers.

As for the sheriff, Bradey sneered at him for a quixotic fool. He had lost his niece. He might have to render an accounting of her money, but he had plenty. And his lawyers would crush the evidence of the fool she had married when he attempted to identify the steers.

At last Gorman was called to the stand. There were many present who believed that he had meant well, but overshot the mark. That Bradey might be guilty, but that proof of guilt was another matter. One steer was too like another. There were others who awaited his testimony with the quiet confidence of those who know a result beforehand. Among these the men of the posse, who had had their demonstration at the Two-Bar the day after the fight, the doctor and the commissioner, the last a trifle uneasy, feeling that he had been tricked into appearance, but glad to be on the windy side of the law.

"Sheriff," asked the district attorney, "what was the important discovery with which you became acquainted shortly before the alleged theft of these steers?"

"I object," said the pompous counsel for Bradey. "Irrelevant."

"I shall place this testimony—or corroboration of it in the shape of certain copies of the *Rural New Yorker,* in evidence," said the district attorney, "if your honor please, after the jury has inspected them."

"You may proceed," said the judge. "I reserve ruling."

"I found," said Gorman, "an article in a farm paper. It had illustrations

with the text. It stated that a cow's muzzle was marked with wrinkles and that no two cows were alike. It showed prints that had bin taken, the same as finger prints are taken and it stated that positive identification could be so made."

"Is this a copy of the paper?"

"It is."

"I have several copies here which I wish to submit as evidence, if your honor please."

They rustled among the jury. The eminent counsel crossed to the district attorney.

"Lemme see one," he said brusquely.

"With pleasure." The lawyer shared it with Bradey and his face lost its jauntiness.

"What next, sheriff?"

"I submitted it to Doctor Mason for his scientific approval. Then I took prints of twenty steers belongin' to Mr. Jarrett. We set 'em out in a likely place, believin' that they might be taken a fancy to by King Bradey."

"Why did you think King Bradey might take them?"

" 'Count of a grudge he had agen Bud Jarrett for interferin' with his men when they tried to drive Mrs. Jordan off her place."

"I object." The eminent counsel was on his feet, protesting indignantly.

"Sustained."

"How did you get these prints?"

"Same as we finger-print criminals. We roped an' threw the steers, tied 'em an' then I ran a printin' ink roller over 'em an' took impressions."

"Are these the impressions?"

"They are."

"In evidence, if you please, Mr. Clerk."

"They are all different?"

"They are."

"And this second set corresponds with them?"

"They do."

"When did you make these?"

"Day after we got the steers back."

"Any witnesses?"

"Erbout twenty."

"Ever make any other experiments?"

"Several of them. The first was at the Peerless Dairy, in Vacada. Doctor Mason was with me an' the land commissioner."

"That will do for the present, sheriff. I have here many records from ranches and dairies where the process has been repeatedly proven. It is scientifically accurate, as infallible as finger printing. Take the witness."

The eminent counsel did not care to take the witness. But he endeavored to discredit the new method. The jury did not accept his arguments.

"Gorman," said Doctor Mason when the prisoner was remanded into the custody of the sheriff, pending transport to the State penitentiary, "what are you going to do now? How about a holiday?"

"After I've handed Bradey over, I don't mind if I do. First, I aim to retire."

"If you try to you'll make the most popular man in the county the most unpopular. The governor won't accept it. Man, you're famous! You're headlining the press of the country."

"Shucks! What are you drivin' at, doc?"

"Can't Pete run your office for a few days?"

"He might. I dunno. Pete's mind ain't strictly on bisness. He's got an idea he can persuade Mrs. Jordan to let him play elephant for her kids after a bit, as a permanent job. But he might. Why?"

"Because I know where we can get some Eastern brook trout. Creek's been stocked for four years and I don't believe it's fished once a year."

"Doc, you're on! Soon as I get back, let's go a-fishin'."

Coming Through on No. 8

by H. Keith Trask

Author of "The High Hand," "Seconds Count," etc.

IN THE CAB OF THE ENGINE THERE WERE ONLY THE TWO—OLD ANSE DABNEY AND LEN PRENTISS. WHO WAS TO KNOW AFTERWARD THAT OLD ANSE HAD FALTERED? . . . . . .

CERTAIN mysteries seem fated never to be solved. They monopolize the public interest for a brief time and then make way for a newer sensation. It is to be supposed that the question as to why Len Prentiss switched the way he did at the last county convention, thereby turning an easy victory for the antirailroad party into overwhelming defeat would go the way of such classics as who hit Billy Patterson.

Lest contemplation of the full beauty of this piece of generalship be denied to the admiration of posterity, Lost River is requested to hark back through memory's halls, or by any other convenient route, to the night of the high-school graduation six years ago. Margery Dabney was class valedictorian, it may be recalled, and Len Prentiss, roped in by virtue of being an alumnus of several years' standing, squirmed through the proceedings in a chair on the platform.

Until she stood out to face an auditorium packed with relatives and friends of the class, Margy Dabney had never been in the public eye to any extent. She was Anse Dabney's kid and it was taken for granted that with such an ancestry she would be queer. If a physical being which was all sharp angles and ungainly lines, a preference for books to beaus and a seeming inability to take any interest in the commonplace activities of her contemporaries be evidences of peculiarity, Margy lived up to expectations. She had been elected valedictorian because nobody else in the class wanted the bother of taking on the job.

She glanced once at her notes and then, her thin arms hanging straight at her sides, delivered her opening sentences in a clear ringing soprano. Len Prentiss, a young runner already

marked by his superiors as a man able to handle himself and his engine in any emergency and therefore as good material for promotion, stopped squirming and sat up straight. Like everybody else, he had known Margy since her baby days, but now, looking at her, it struck him that he had never really seen her before.

A whimsical fancy flashed through his head that she was too little and too utterly alone to be out there, facing without protection not only the audience of the evening but life itself, with all its puzzles and buffets. He wanted to go and stand beside her—lend her countenance. Not being given to philosophizing as a rule, he also wondered what had made him think a batty thing like that.

Margy needed nobody to lend her countenance. She made a good speech, a thundering good speech, everybody agreed—they would never have believed it of her. Nevertheless, at the dance afterward she sat stiffly against the wall with her mother in the same old way while sisters who could not, to save their lives, have conceived, much less enunciated her ringing periods, danced every dance with three and four partners.

Swinging past her at intervals, Prentiss suspected he saw behind the gold-framed spectacles which masked her eyes a half-wistful, somewhat defiant expression which troubled him a little. Came the last number. Deliberately dodging the open invitation in Allie Nagle's expectant attitude—Len danced very well—he walked over to the class valedictorian.

He did not notice the starry brightness which shone through the gold-rimmed lenses at his approach, but stood before her carelessly. "I'll dance this one with you, Margy," he offered, precisely as her big brother would have offered, had she had one.

Hearing the indifferently worded invitation, the girl's long slim, capable-fingered hands, folded over the rolled diploma in her lap, gripped and marred the fair circumference of the sheepskin.

"You are very kind, Leonard," Margy told him, slightly flushed and speaking with the precise, bookish diction which Lost River thought affected. She was not looking at him and under the ruffles of her plain, white graduation dress her flat little chest rose and fell stormily. "You are very kind, I am sure—but I do not care to dance."

"Oh we-ell——" Prentiss hesitated, indefinably piqued by her refusal. Then he turned away, to cut in upon Allie Nagle, who did care to dance with him.

Margery Dabney went East to college the following fall—the first girl from Lost River to take so advanced a step. The town wondered, even laughed good-naturedly for two days, then forgot all about her.

The battle of the old against the new was just beginning in the little empire of town and county, set off by itself in the heart of the vast north bushland. Settlers who had no interest in the North-Country Transcontinental save occasionally to contribute their mite to its operating revenue, were beginning to come in and were introducing a new element into politics.

Theretofore, the road had run local affairs. That is to say its employees had filled all civic offices because there had been nobody else to elect, the trappers and lumberjacks being obviously ineligible and unfit. This new element complained of corporate domination and threatened to try its growing strength against the octopus at the polls.

It was natural enough, but it was also unjust and resented by the men of the Lost River division. If the road had dominated, it had been a benevolent despotism and the individuals given political preferment had never put loyalty to their salt above the obligations of

good citizenship. But they had always seen to it that the railroad received a square deal in the matter of taxation and the thousand and one other ways in which a railroad needs a friend in the community.

That campaign also betrayed the first hint of another possible element of disunion which gave Dave Nagle more concern than the mouthings of the anti-railroad party. The master mechanic was by way of being the nearest approach to a political boss the county had known. He was the mouthpiece of the higher officers and he found himself faced by incipient rebellion within his own ranks.

The younger men were beginning to chafe against a monopoly of all the best jobs by a few old-timers. The pension list should begin to grow they argued, but, failing that, they certainly deserved some of the political gravy. Nagle was able, however, to keep the lid from blowing off the pot until the sixth summer after Margy Dabney left home.

Then a new superintendent came—and efficiency was his god. He retired old Abe Mulhall first crack. Abe had been road foreman of engines from time immemorial. Len Prentiss was appointed acting road foreman and his confirmation and therefore his whole future was dependent upon the way he handled a certain definite policy to which Superintendent Tillinghast stood committed. The old order had received its first wallop and promptly retaliated. They knew themselves helpless upon the road, but they waded in to bust up Nagle's plans for the fall campaign. Bowing to the growing sentiment, the master mechanic had picked Bill Carney for county assessor. Carney had the backing of Prentiss and all the younger engine and trainmen.

"Well, the old guard has unlimbered its guns," Nagle told Prentiss when the new acting road foreman dropped in to say good-by to him before starting upon his annual holiday in the bush. "Dabney and Mulhall say that if I nominate Carney they'll all vote for Seraphin Lavoiseur."

"That hot-air tonsorial artist—he's a joke," Prentiss asserted.

"Is he? He won't be a joke for the road if he gets in—with the anti-octopus gang backing him. Lavoiseur's strong with the settlers. To beat him, we've all got to work together."

"Who does the old guard favor?"

"Anse Dabney. He's suddenly taken a notion he'd like to hold office."

"You mean he's suddenly taken a notion to fight back over Mulhall's retirement, don't you?" Prentiss suggested.

"It amounts to the same thing. It'll split the road wide open."

"Ye-ah," Prentiss agreed musingly. With him the road's interests were paramount and there was the matter of the first assessment of the east-yard extension to consider. "Maybe we could make Carney and the gang see reason, rather than let Lavoiseur in."

"Carney would, but you know blame well Dab couldn't be nominated, let alone elected," Nagle came back. "You're strong with the boys, but you couldn't stop enough of 'em from boltin' him to do the damage."

"No, I guess I couldn't," Prentiss assented, rising and gathering together his traps. "Well, so long, Dave, you worry about it for the next month. I'm goin' fishin!"

While his most reliable lieutenant both in business and politics was catching trout without a troubling thought, Dave Nagle sought diligently for a dark horse upon whom all factions would unite. There was no such animal. The old guard couldn't win, but it could die fighting—and when Lavoiseur started assessing the North Country realty holdings, the treasurer's office would realize there had been a battle.

One brief, temporary ray of hope Nagle did have. Mrs. Dabney suddenly

passed away. While her husband took her loss hard, he didn't let it long interfere with his political aspirations. Margy came back for the funeral. Lost River found her much changed and less in tune with local interests than ever before.

A sleepy-headed bell hop pounded on Prentiss' door in the Fort George Hotel at three o'clock in the morning. Len had reported himself over the telephone the night before as back on the job.

"Wire for you," the youth explained to a wrathful demand what was the matter.

Grumbling inarticulately, Prentiss turned on the light and retrieved the yellow envelope which had been pushed under his door.

No. 12 carrying three cars raw silk. Company anxious make new delivery record Yokohama New York. Train losing time. Ride her over division and expedite much as possible. TILLINGHAST.

After a heated argument with the telephone operator, Prentiss got the engine dispatcher at the roundhouse. "How's No. 12 and who handles her to Lost River?"

"Two hours late. Dabney has No. 2006 on the turntable now."

Dabney, eh? He wouldn't be pleased by unasked assistance. The first hint of dawn was already in the sky when Prentiss, not yet wholly awake, stumbled through the silent and deserted street toward the station. A gentle breath of morning breeze fanned his cheek, bringing with it a faint, resinous aromatic flavor which made him sniff. Bush fire somewhere north. The rangers would better watch out sharp. There hadn't been another such dry season in years.

No. 12 pulled in as he reached the platform; fifteen sealed cars of express matter through from coast to coast. The double-header which had brought her from Green Plains cut off and Anse Dabney backed the tender of No. 2006, one of the huge new bull-elephants, against the leading car. Prentiss scaled the lofty height of the gangway to find the veteran runner, nose close to the bull's-eyes, timing lubricator feeds by the watch.

"Mornin', Dab. Fine chance for some hidaddy work with this silk," Prentiss gave greeting. "Clean dry rail and this baby could yank twenty cars, let alone fifteen."

Anson Dabney squinted at the left-hand cylinder feed. Then he nodded satisfaction, dropped his watch into his pocket, shut off the light, sank into his seat and released the air, upon signal from the car inspector at the hind end.

"What you doin' here?" he inquired, for the first time indicating that he knew Prentiss to be on earth.

"Got in from my vacation last night. Heard about this record bustin' stunt and thought I'd have a nice fast ride home with you."

Dabney gave the acting road foreman a suspicious stare. "How'd you hear? You must yearn for hidaddyin'—to be out this early when you don't have to. You'll get no fast ridin' with me. Seven hours is card time for this train and that's what we'll make it in."

He began fussing with the regulation of the feedwater heater. "You young fellers are snappy workers, but you can't rush me."

"Here's your orders, Dab. Rights over everything. They want this egg busted wide open." Conductor Adams joined the conference. "I make it four, forty-one—let's go."

"Forty and a half is right," said Dabney, glancing up from the orders to check time. Then he finished reading them. Prentiss stretched out his hand to receive the tissues, but Dabney, ignoring him, gave them to the fireman, who promptly surrendered them to the boss.

The sun peeped over the rim of the eastern hills to greet No. 2006 yanking her drag up the grade out of the yard, a feathery trail of steam from a lifted pop mingling above the car roofs with the almost imperceptible smoke haze. Prentiss, sitting on the left-hand side, watched the old man hook up the links as the engine reached level ground, then adjust the throttle until he had settled the train into the steady forty miles an hour called for by the time card.

From where the road foreman sat, clear across the cab, the drops of oil rising in regular sequence through the clear glass of the lubricator bull's-eyes were perfectly visible, but presently Dabney rose and squinted at them again to reassure himself that the feed was correct. Then he settled back once more and for mile after mile there was no sound in the cab save the regular and orderly symphony of pounding rods and driving boxes, the hammer of the trailer truck over rail joint and switch frog, the clicking arpeggio of the stoker feed.

Mile after mile the case of fidgets which had attacked Len Prentiss grew more pronounced. With the passage of each familiar landmark he dropped his watch back into his pocket, calling down sotto voce maledictions upon the stubborn head of the old mule across the cab. Evidently he'd have to interfere. Dab had turned ugly because Prentiss was riding the engine and was deliberately defying the expressed desire of the company. Not like Dab, either, to monkey with the buzz saw.

Len hated to butt in, but there was that message in his pocket. Of all the old guard, Dabney had taken his appointment as road foreman most ill. This was, however, a poor time for Dab to show his independence.

"Jed, how much water we got?" Dabney asked the fireman.

Before answering, Jed Fosdick climbed up over the coal pile to investigate at the tank manhole.

This was the limit. "You won't need to take water at Balliott," Prentiss called. "With these bulls, I was always able to run to East Devilfish for water."

"You're able to do a lot of things—you're tryin' some of 'em now," Dabney retorted angrily. Twisted around on his seat and craning his neck, he was watching the fireman, atop the back end of the tank. Fosdick slammed the manhole cover and held up both hands, fingers spread wide apart and then a single digit.

"Why don't ye holler, 'stead of makin' fool signs?" Dabney shrilled, his eyes puckered.

"Eleven thousand!" Fosdick roared.

"Hey?" Dabney beckoned violently. "Come here and talk like a Christian."

"Eleven thousand," Fosdick reiterated, sliding down the shifting coal to the foot plate. "What's the matter—are you blind and deef?"

"No—I ain't blind and deef—and I don't have to take sass from no young smart Elecks," the runner assured him with a half defiant, half apprehensive glance at the road foreman of engines. Rising, the old man thrust his upper body through the window, peering ahead, brushed a hand across his forehead.

"Blame this smoke!" He reached uncertainly for the throttle. "Why don't ye call the board?" he snapped at the fireman in uncalled-for irritation.

"Clear board at Balliott!" Fosdick snapped back, now as mad as a wet hen. "All the smoke there is is in his eyes," he added aside to Prentiss.

It seemed that way to the road foreman. He had seen the dropping semaphore the instant the engine rounded into the tangent leading down to Balliott station. Dab might merely be cautious, to be sure, but it looked suspicious. He had decided against a wholly unnecessary stop for water, however.

Judged by the standards of the Lost River division, the track from Balliott to the beginning of the Horseshoe at Wolf Creek is straight and level. Runners with a debt of lost time charged against them make the most of it, but Anse Dabney displayed no evidence of intention to discharge his obligation.

Slipping off the seat, Prentiss crossed to stand beside the old man. "Dab, you know the boss wants to make a record with this drag. Better try to please him, hadn't you?" He smiled pacifically.

Dabney's face turned set and ugly. "I'm doin' all the rules call for—as much as is safe," he stated, watching the track.

"Safe—here—in broad daylight—with the scenery all anchored where it belongs?" Prentiss laughed. "Get out—you'd be safe at a hundred an hour, if she'd wheel 'em that fast."

Dark red suffused the runner's furrowed cheeks. His lips parted, but he clamped them tight again, rode in silence for perhaps half a mile while varied emotions exhibited themselves in his countenance. Then he smiled, craftily, tauntingly, a provocative, superior smile. Rising, he stepped down to the foot plate.

"You're the boss," he suggested. "You're supposed to show us how to run our engines. Why don't you take a hold of her and show me the real hidaddy stuff? I ain't too old to learn."

"I'll just do that," Prentiss agreed, delighted with this easy solution of the unpleasant dilemma.

Nevertheless he was puzzled. Why had Dab made this play? Why had he voluntarily given place to the man whose authority he had hitherto affected to flout? Giving Anson Dabney an exhibition of time catching which should have elicited the old man's hearty applause, but did not, Prentiss considered that question. Uphill and down, swinging around the treacherous grade of the Horseshoe and hammering up the long grade of Copper Hill, minute by minute he brought the train nearer to schedule time. When he stopped at Lost River with better than an hour regained, he believed he had found the answer.

Climbing the stairs to the superintendent's office, he decided that he had also thrown light on the inside meaning of that condition of his acting appointment which was a *sine qua non,* if it were to be confirmed.

In a country where, for eight months out of the twelve, a boulder, frost-riven from its bed, may be encountered when rounding any curve, where landslides and washouts and drifting snow give wrecker and extra gangs little rest, keen sight, perfect hearing and a nimbly working brain are vitally necessary assets in an engine cab. Lacking these in any degree, a man has no business pulling trains on the Lost River division.

Hence Tillinghast's decree for the ruthless elimination of the unfit and superannuated among the runners; a decree which it was up to the road foreman of engines to enforce to the letter. Abe Mulhall would not do it, so Abe had become its first victim. Len was appointed to achieve the end, without friction and hard feeling if possible, but to achieve the end. With the going of Mulhall, the old guard had seen the handwriting on the wall. Tillinghast, they believed, had shown himself a callously heartless monster, caring nothing for the feelings of his possible victims.

Of course he wasn't, he was merely impersonal, quite properly putting the good of the road before the pride of the individual. Prentiss knew him to be right. He was sorry for Dabney, but he felt no hesitation now about making a report which would send the old man before the company surgeon for searching examination.

Dabney had become unfit. Furthermore, Dabney knew it and was deliber-

ately trying to conceal the truth. Those incidents on No. 2006 showed as much. The old man didn't want to retire. He might have dodged for quite a time, too, but for the silk shipment. Knowing himself to lack the nerve and the confidence in his own faculties necessary to make a fast run, the old fox had very cleverly passed the buck. Too cleverly; that surrender had been unnatural, an overplayed hand.

These facts might also well explain Dab's sudden desire to hold office. He was likely putting out a life line, a pride salver. If he found he had to go, how much better to resign because elected county assessor than to have to face his community as a doddering pensioner!

Prentiss rather regretted that the old man could not be elected. It is hard to be laid on the shelf. And he'd make a good assessor, no doubt of that; fair to all concerned and careful. The old crab was known to keep a personal expense account in which was noted every nickel cigar he'd smoked since he began in '88. No chance to elect him though. He'd just have to retire and Len would have to stand the gaff of his bitter and spiteful tongue. This was one of the penalties of promotion and responsibility——

"I beg your pardon!" Pulling up short, he snatched off his cap. Blundering down the corridor, entirely absorbed, he had nearly run over a girl emerging from the dispatcher's office.

"It's quite all right, Leonard. You are preoccupied with the cares of state, no doubt. This is my first opportunity to congratulate you upon your promotion." The girl glanced up at him from the glove she had been buttoning.

"Why—why—Margy Dabney!" Prentiss blurted, for the first time really seeing the slender, black-garbed figure.

Miss Dabney smiled, a faint rose tinting the ivory of her cheeks. "So you do remember me. I wondered whether you would."

"Remember you—why shouldn't I?" And yet the man saw that his question was answered in a way by the appearance of this slender, graceful self-possessed young woman who had little in common with the meager, sharp-cornered kid of other days.

Nevertheless she was amazingly the same. Tortoise-shell rims had replaced the gold spectacles, but behind the lenses he thought he detected something of the old half lonely, half defiant expression. There were no corners left, but she was still little, and she looked oddly out of the picture, here in the second-floor corridor of the old headquarters building.

"Where you going?" he asked, falling into step as she moved toward the stairs.

"Home."

Something in the way she said the one word made him ask: "How long will you be home, Margy?"

"Always—I suppose. I'm copy operator for Ed Porter now. Father seems to need me—since mother——"

"Oh—your mother—I'm sorry—I meant to——"

"Never mind, Leonard," she cut short his stumbling. "I know what you meant—kindly—as always."

There was nothing sharp nor bitter in her voice, yet as they crossed Main Street and headed toward the Dabney house, he glanced sidelong down at her and unexpectedly found himself wishing that he had made her dance that night so long ago. Dog-gone, why hadn't he thought of asking her earlier in the evening?

"I guess you didn't much want to come back here, Margy."

It was her turn to glance fleetingly at him. For the second time since their meeting her color deepened. "I did and I didn't, Leonard. I hated to leave New York. I had a good position and there were theaters and people—and I'd had one story accepted——"

"I know. I happened to pick up a

magazine one day on No. 1 and saw it."

"Those things were hard to give up, Leonard. But—after all—I'm a Lost River girl and—and father needed me."

They had reached the Dabney front door. Margy opened it and stood on the threshold. Len Prentiss looked at her again. Lost River had forgotten this girl in two days, but she had never forgotten Lost River. Denied the things which her soul craved she had gone out alone to find them and she had found them. Then she had come back—after seeing success and happiness—perhaps fame—in her grasp. She had come back, stanch loyal heart that she was, put it all behind her, because of Anse Dabney's need.

Something of what the sacrifice must have meant came to him as she held out her hand. She who could write stories to sit behind Ed Porter and copy orders. She to face again the misunderstanding, the covert amusement of the community which had never understood her. She who had spent a childhood utterly alone to come back and waste the life which might have been so full taking care of a selfish old father who had never had a thought for any one save himself. The sheer unselfish wonder of her!

"Thank you for bringing me home, Leonard. If you care to, come in any evening."

Care to! Emotions such as never before had troubled him, but which he found no difficulty in recognizing, swept over Len Prentiss. Fiery tingles ran up his arm as their hands touched. His heart was jumping and his tongue felt thick and cumbersome as, stepping into the hall, he closed the door and swept her into his arms.

"Margy, I sure am strong for you!"

It was scarcely an adequate statement, yet it seemed to satisfy her. Warm, sweet lips clung greedily to his own. All soft and yielding she nestled against him, but presently, she freed herself enough to draw back and search his face.

"Len—are you perfectly sure you're this strong?"

"Am I?" He laughed, pulling her back. "Honey, I've been achin' to do this ever since you were a kid."

"And I've been aching to have you." She was whispering confession from the safe haven of his shoulder. "But I never dared to hope——"

So that was that and all very satisfactory. Len was for hunting up Anse and breaking the news right then. A streak of her old shyness made Margy hold out for time. People had always thought her odd. What would they say if she announced her engagement to a man within an hour after she met him for the first time in six years? Len didn't in the least care what they'd say, but as long as he could be engaged in private, he was willing that Margy should have her way in public.

Not until much later, when he was headed for his boarding house, his feet finding every stumblingblock and his head in the upper clouds, did he remember that he had been on the way to make an important report to Tillinghast when he so nearly ran over his love. Halting, he half turned toward the yard. From somewhere west of town, there drifted back the heavy cough of one of the bull elephants.

Important business. He took an uncertain step. It should be done at once. Important business? Damned troublesome, embarrassing business—and his watch said it was already past dinner time. He put it away, went on. Time enough to talk to Tillinghast later in the afternoon.

The smoke haze of which Dabney had complained was thick enough to trouble any man when Prentiss boarded Bill Carney's engine on Wolf Creek passing track. It had steadily increased

during the forty-eight hours which had elapsed since train No. 12 had made record time over the division.

The young-blood road candidate for nomination to the county assessorship was helping his left bower clean the fire. Pausing in his wielding of the slice bar to mop his face, he gave greeting to the road foreman and his chief political backer.

"Thought maybe with you on the job, we'd begin to draw some regular coal, Len."

"I'll start in on the coal after we get the election settled," Prentiss told him.

"I hope after election, I won't have to bother my head about coal for the next three years." Carney grinned.

Poking his head through the gangway, Prentiss called down to the fireman, who was pounding the side of the ash pan with a coal pick: "Hey, smoke, you sprinkle those ashes good before you leave them. There's fire enough in the bush without us starting any."

"That's right, too," Carney agreed soberly, yanking a big clinker out upon the apron. I hear that up north it's got away from the wardens clear from Balliott to Copper Hill."

"They've got out all the miners to try to save the town," Prentiss told him. "If it works down much farther, we're liable not to run any trains for a while."

"Worst year for fires I ever did see," Carney affirmed. "All right, Jack? If you got those ashes soused, we'll be on our way. You goin' west with us, Len?"

"As far as Balliott. I want to pick up No. 8 there." Prentiss dropped on the seat behind Carney as the runner pulled his train out of the sidetrack.

"Who's pullin' No. 8 to-day?" Planting a foot against the front door, Carney eased back on the reverse lever.

"Anse Dabney."

"Dab, eh?" The runner glanced back over his shoulder. "I shouldn't think you'd want to ride much with him. Len, what makes Dabney so sore on you?"

"You—for one thing," the road foreman answered, his face troubled. "Then I butted in on him when he was pulling that silk shipment. That made him good and sore."

"I'll say it did." Again Carney glanced over his shoulder. "Did you know he tried to have the adjustment committee complain about you?"

"I did—and that's partly why I'm here now. I can stand Dabney being sore on me, I'm not the first, but his attitude is going to help elect Seraphin Lavoiseur." This was exact as far as it went, but it was not the sole motive which had impelled Prentiss to seek the candidate he was backing on the eve of the county convention. However, it furnished excuse for what he was going to say next. Reaching out, he began to play with a gauge cock.

"Bill, how would you feel if I asked you to withdraw in favor of Anse Dabney?"

"I'd feel like hell—unless you had a mighty good reason." Mr. Carney blew for the order board at Whitney.

"That's a good reason. We don't want Lavoiseur and his gang assessing the east-yard extension. We can nominate you in spite of the old guard, but we can't elect you."

"No, and you couldn't elect Anse Dabney," Carney retorted, opening out as the semaphore dropped to clear. "If I thought you could, I'd withdraw, but this thing has got to be unanimous."

Prentiss gave the gauge cock a twist which brought a sputtering swish of steam and water. "I thought maybe if you went to the boys yourself and put it to them——" His eyes were on the thickening smoke clouds which a northerly wind, risen within the last half hour, was bringing down in increasing volume.

Turning square around, Carney stared at his friend. "Len, what's the idea?

I'll poll more votes than Dabney. If I didn't know you so well, damned if I wouldn't think you were tryin' to double cross the gang."

"I want to see the road win, Bill."

"So do I—but it won't win with Dab." The candidate started the injector with a vicious jerk. "If there was time to get to the boys and I thought it would do any good, I'd work for Dabney. But I won't be at the convention now and it would take *some* talkin' to unite them for Dab. You know all this as well as I do."

Prentiss did. Without any further argument, he crossed over and took the fireman's seat. What was the use of his kidding himself about the good of the road? That counted of course, although this time, the fight seemed lost. The real reason for his asking Carney to withdraw, the real reason why he was now riding to meet Anson Dabney on No. 8 was the one because of which that important business with Tillinghast, the report which should send Dabney before the surgeon was a thing still of the future.

When he walked into the office corridor night before last, Prentiss was about to do a thing which he regretted, but which he recognized to be for the good of the road. When he walked out again, he had forgotten everything but a slender small girl with a sense of loyalty excelling anything that Len Prentiss had dreamed possible.

Later, remembering his duty, he had also remembered that he was now engaged to Margy Dabney. How then was he to make that report? It was not that he feared that Margy would cease to love him, nor that she would not understand. Dab, however, would vent all the bitterness of his spleen and disappointment upon the man directly responsible, the man he had thought to be spying upon him. Under those conditions, it could not be expected that he would accept Prentiss for a son-in-law. Margy would bow to his will. Having sacrificed her happiness once to the old man, she would do it again. While Anse would not live forever, he was good for many years. Until their span was measured, Len could not doubt that Margy and he must wait. Selfish? Not wholly—Margy must suffer as much as he.

Prentiss had delayed from hour to hour in taking the irretrievable step; had gone to the length of letting Dabney go out on another round trip when he knew the old man unfit. Even more, he had dallied with this foolish idea of attempting to have Dabney nominated to the office he craved. And now, torn by worry and self-contempt, he was hurrying to Balliott, not daring, in face of the ominous threat of these increasing smoke clouds, to let Dab make the homeward trip alone.

It was a piece of foolish temporizing —as useless and cowardly as his plea to Carney to withdraw. He might chaperon Dabney this one trip, but how about the next and the next—and all the other trips after that? What was the use in prolonging the agony? To-morrow morning, he would go to Tillinghast and get over with it. No use to dodge. He'd always taken his medicine before, he could take this dose, bitter though it was—bitter for him—bitter for Margy.

Bitterest of all was contemplation of the simple, easy solution which stood ready to his hand—if only there had been some way to put it over. But Carney was right. To win, the man who was nominated would have to poll the unanimous vote of the railroad crowd, plus those of the settlers not committed to the antis. A miracle might unite them for Anson Dabney. Certainly, nothing short of that.

"Clear board at Balliott—No. 8 on the sidetrack," the fireman called.

Prentiss got to his feet. It struck him as pretty rough, but Margy and he would just have to stand the gaff.

Dabney, leaning from the gangway of his engine, hailed the freight runner as they came abreast. "Hey, Carney, you'll have to let me take your fireman. Mine's broke his leg."

"Now what do you think of that?" Carney grumbled, reaching for the air. "Forest fires threatenin' to hit us, bad coal and me to have to wrastle this drag into the Fort with nobody but a head shack to fog it!"

"Keep your fireman," Prentiss told him, getting down on the tender step. "I'll fire for Dabney." Jumping to the ground, he walked back and boarded No. 1300. Noting the figures on the cab panel, he wondered whether hoodoo lurked within them for him.

"How in thunder did Jed manage to break a leg?" he inquired.

Dabney, glooming in solitary state, received him without enthusiasm. "He went to look at the water and slipped on a lump of coal comin' back. Where's Carney's fireman?"

"Where he belongs. I'll fire for you."

"Don't want you—want somebody who can get away with it," Dabney stated, with an ugly show of temper.

There was no use arguing with the old crab. Prentiss began to cover the fire. The No. 1300 class is not stoker equipped and with the first few scoopsfull he handled, he realized that Dabney's objection might not be wholly based upon dislike. Conductor Adams appeared, his face grave.

"Anse, Wolf Creek reports fire beginnin' to show about three miles north of the Horseshoe and Copper Hill Junction operator says the town is blazing and he expects to have to move out of the station. Looks like it's all around us. I see you got Carney's fireman. Think we better keep goin'? Oh—hello, Len—is it you?"

"I think we better ask for orders to go back to the Fort," Dabney opined, seemingly much disturbed. "A forest fire is my idea of nothin' to fool with."

"Mine, too—though I never saw a real one yet," the conductor confessed. "What's your notion, Len?"

"Any orders to go back?"

"No."

"Then why not keep goin' until we get 'em? Headquarters knows more about the situation than we do. Besides, we're liable to run into as much trouble between here and Fort George as we are goin' on."

"I don't like it nohow," Dabney spoke up. "It's foolishness to take such chances."

"Yes—and I'd look foolish holdin' up a lot of through passengers before I had any real reason to," the train captain decided. "Len's right. We'll keep goin' until somebody tells us to stop."

Firing a heavy train which demands every ounce of power the locomotive can exert is no joke for a man whose muscles are inured to the work by daily practice. In his day, Prentiss had been an artist with the scoop, but that day was some years in the past. Inside ten miles, he was feeling the pace and Dabney, seeing his quick breathing, flushed face and heavy sweat, began to haze him, using all the little petty tricks wherewith a runner can make things harder for a fireman whom he dislikes.

Prentiss knew well enough what the old man was up to, but aside from the realization of the futility of protest, a stubborn resentful pride would have kept him silent. Dab wasn't going to stall him, no matter how killing the labor. With every breath, he swallowed gulps of the choking wood smoke, which rasped throat and lungs and set him coughing. Nearing Wolf Creek, the smoke had become so bad that Dabney started the electric headlight, although the sun had not yet set. The powerful beam had little penetrative effect upon the eddying, swirling blanket through which the engine plunged, so dense and heavy as almost to be tangible, laden

with a foretaste of the fierce heat which had given it birth.

"We'll never get around the Horseshoe," Dabney declared as the headlight generator began its whining purr. "I bet they turn us back at Wolf Creek." Shutting off, he braked the train. "We're right atop the station now, but I can't see a thing."

Glad of a brief respite, Prentiss leaned out of the gangway. The smoke-laden air blowing past was in degree purer than the stagnant eddies within the cab. The station building loomed up, misty and indistinct and a single figure, grip in hand, awaited them on the platform. It was the operator. Dabney stopped the engine.

"Do we go back?"

"Don't know where you go," the operator called. "Wires went down somewhere east a half hour ago." He hurried toward the smoker, adding over his shoulder: "Wherever you're bound, I'm goin' along. If I have to roost in the lake, I want company."

"My God, Prentiss, we can't go on," Dabney quavered, his face showing yellowish white blotches through the grime, his enmity conquered for the moment by the urge of a more potent emotion.

"Better go on than go back—look there!" The road foreman pointed.

Some indefinable distance behind the rear car, a dull flicker of angry red showed through the smoke. The fire, in that inexplicable way in which such fires travel, had jumped down to cut off their retreat. The red brightened to crimson and the smoke, lightening, shot upward upon the current of superheated air. The signal whistle shrilled two urgent blasts.

"Now see what your foolishness has let us into!" Dabney snarled, but he obeyed the whistle.

Pulling up the long twisty miles of the west leg of the Horseshoe developed into a race against the enemy. In intervals of firing, Prentiss watched it sweeping ever nearer. Twice, in the gloom behind the train, sudden light patches showed where clumps of trees had burst spontaneously into flame. It is one of the most daunting phenomena of fire in the woods; this long-armed outreach of destruction, leaving untouched for the moment intervening spaces of as much as half a mile.

Roaring Brook trestle sang resonantly under the pounding wheels. The engine pitched into the down grade. They had won the first round. Prentiss covered the fire, breathed thankfully of the purer air under the lee of the sheer rock walls. Behind, west leg and crescent were all aflame.

At East Devilfish, the agent, his family and a little group of settlers from the back country, each individual clutching his most portable and his most precious possessions, awaited the train. No man knew what lay ahead, between themselves and the haven of the treeless barrens east of Copper Hill, but they all knew from what they had fled. Ruin and smoking desolation now reigned where a few short hours ago had been homesteads and crops ready for the harvest.

One and all they piled aboard the coaches. There were no lamentations, no railing at the malicious fire demon which had stripped them to the bare husk. A still, insistent hurry to escape pushed them up the car steps. They asked only to leave behind that threatening crescent of flame, to have wiped from their ears by the steady thunder of the flying train that low, sinister drumming which was the war cry of destruction.

Watching them, Dabney fell to railing. "It's no use—we better all take to the lake. We'll never get through." Complete darkness had come, a smothering oblivion which no mortal sense could penetrate. Behind the train raged a world aflame. Ahead of it——

"We got to go through," Prentiss told him. "We couldn't take to the lake. There's forty feet of water right at the shore."

Dabney opened out with a shaking hand. Prentiss was right. Those sheer cliffs, bathing their feet in ice cold water, rested upon no shelving beach to furnish harborage.

"I'm as good as dead," he bleated. "If you'd listened to an old man and gone back——"

Perhaps he was right, but it was too late for speculation or hesitation. Perhaps the fire, sweeping around from the mines, had already attacked the long tongue of forest which clothes the flanks of Copper Hill. It might well be and if so, they were trapped. The fire had reached the Horseshoe with a swiftness incredible to him, who had known bush fires all his life. But there could be no going back, no staying at East Devilfish. Salvation, if any salvation there were to be, lay in winning to the open beyond Copper Hill.

The next hour was blind, headlong flight. The keenest eye would have been of no avail to find the way. So thick was the smoke in the cab that the gauge lamp was no more than a luminous, furry blotch. Prentiss, bending to his labor at the fire door could barely distinguish the figure of the runner, a bare five feet distant.

The engine struck a patch of level, the tangent leading into Copper Hill. On a sudden, the blanketing murk was lightened by a luminous redness not of this earth. A new savor crept into the resinous tang of the wood smoke, the odor of bubbling, blistering paint. Heat of the brazen gates of hell seemed to dry his blood. A long tongue of flame, disembodied, rootless, licked out to caress the window on Dabney's side. The glass fell inward with a tinkling crash.

Faltering, the runner made to shut off. "It's no use. I'm gone—the hill's all afire!"

"Gone be damned! Open out—pound her to it!" Jumping to his side, Prentiss thrust the craven hand away. "Hammer her. I'll give you steam!"

"I can't—I can't stand it—the heat." Crouching down behind the steel cab side, Dabney wrapped head and shoulders in his jumper with fumbling hands.

And this miserable thing was the man for whom Margy had sacrificed her career. To shield this coward, Len Prentiss had nearly been false to his trust. Quitting cold, when in steel coaches and Pullmans, ventilators and double windows tight closed, two hundred people were relying upon him. Some would be cursing, some praying, some tight-lipped and quiet would be hugging babes—and all would be relying upon Anse Dabney.

The smoke veil masking the hill had been rent. There was still time to win the summit. Only the advance guard of the fire had reached the track. Here and there, flaming outposts like buoys in a channel lighted the way. Here and there a bright gleam, low down, showed that a brand had kindled a tie. The main body, swift, yet more leisurely could still be dodged. But they must hurry. To hurry, they must have steam. To have and hold the steam up the long grade a cunning hand must pump the boiler, nurse the cutoff and watch the spinning drivers against the possible slippage which might mean a fatal stall.

A man has only two hands. For Prentiss, there would be time to do nothing save feed the ravenous maw of the firebox. Already he had hesitated too long, glaring at this quitter—Margy's father. The steam was falling back. Jerking the man to his feet with savage ruthlessness, he yelled threats which carried their meaning to the panic-fuddled brain.

"You've got to stand it. If you don't

come through, I'll cut that white liver out of you before the fire has a chance!"

Copper Hill is seven miles long. To the man toiling with coal which almost ignited before it reached the firedoor, fighting for a meager breath of the scanty oxygen which the flames had left and which, when he got it, tortured his lungs with knifelike darts of pain, it was seven times seven hundred thousand and an eternity of hell on top of all. Once, Dabney, head shrouded in the dripping, steaming jumper, would have quit his post, crying that he must drop into the tank. Prentiss drove him back with one swift blow.

And then, when to the people in the train it seemed that life was spent, when in a chaotic whirl of crimson destruction the main body enveloped them, reaching out long greedy fingers to warp and spread the steel, train No. 8 swept past the ruins of the junction station. On the uplands, the fire-generated gale rushing through the shattered windows bathed scorched bodies in a blessed chill. Along the steel car sides isolated remnants of paint and varnish flared up and then went black, trailing foul blue smoke down the clean wind.

In the cab of No. 1300, one blackened man, puffy white blisters thick on grimy face and hands, staggered to the gangway to gulp the life-saving wind. He spoke no word.

The other unwrapped from about his head the shielding jumper which Prentiss had snatched in time to keep continuously wet. Once he glanced back at the door of hell and once down at the road foreman of engines panting in the gangway. His hand went up to rub his face under the left eye, but he spoke no word either.

They reached Lost River at ten that night, where anxious watchers awaited relatives and friends. A crowd surrounded No. 1300, cheering, showering upon the men who had brought them through incoherent words of praise and thanks from full hearts. And still Len Prentiss said no word.

Anson Dabney, standing in the gangway, raised a hand for silence. "Folks, I'll just tell you one thing," quoth Margy's father. "You better thank God you had an old-timer on the head end this night."

Hearing this pronouncement, Len Prentiss suddenly saw a great truth. There is nothing wholly bad. Always, somewhere, there is a silver lining for somebody in every cloud. The whirlwind had passed, leaving in its wake ruined homes and blasted hopes for others, but for him it had blazed a trail of hope. Much as his heart felt for them, Len Prentiss could not help these ruined settlers, but he believed they could and would help him.

Still he said nothing. It was not until Dabney was backing No. 1300 toward the roundhouse that, speculatively regarding a discoloration under the runner's left eye which could well have been caused by forcible contact with some hard object, say a fist, Prentiss broke a silence which had lasted since they entered the hell of Copper Hill.

"Dab, the reverse lever or something sure gave you a beautiful shiner in the excitement."

Dave Nagle, presiding over the county convention, was not happy. Five ballots had been taken and Carney was not yet nominated. The old guard was letting him know there was a war. Looking out over the high-school auditorium, he sought vainly among delegates and spectators for that fabled animal a last-minute dark horse. In the center of the hall, a figure asked recognition and Nagle frowned in surprise. A face swathed in bandages made the delegate's features well-nigh unrecognizable, but Nagle recognized him at once.

"The gentleman from the third," said the county chairman.

"Mr. Chairman, I'm no orator and I couldn't do justice to my subject if I were," Len Prentiss began. "I just want to announce that my next ballot will go for Anson Dabney."

He paused briefly to let the sensation caused by this announcement run its course. "I want to announce further that Mr. Carney, the candidate I've been backing, would approve my switch if he were here. He would join with me in the hope that this convention will make the nomination of Mr. Dabney unan——"

"S-say, Len, where do you get that stuff?" The ranks of the progressives interrupted in a simultaneous roar.

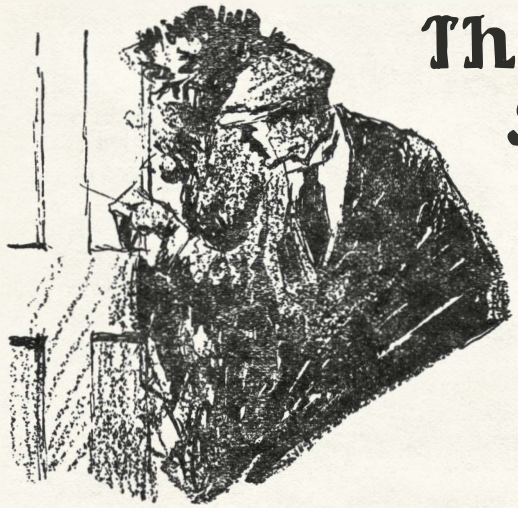
"Where do I get it? I'll tell you. Last night, No. 8 came through a forest fire. Some of you here were on the train. More of you had loved ones and friends on her. There are folks in this hall who have lost everything but their lives and the clothes they wear. They'd have lost them, too—if No. 8 hadn't come through. As I said, I'm no talker, but I'd like to try to make you see what it was like on the engine."

Prentiss might be no talker, but with a simple eloquence which carried conviction, he gave them a word picture of the fire. It was not exactly a detailed account, in places it lacked definition, but the only man qualified so to do by virtue of presence on the engine, made no effort to introduce correction or emendation. He was busy puffing out his chest and noting the nudges and side glances which identified him with the tale.

To a girl in the gallery, leaning forward with shining eyes fixed upon the speaker through shell-rimmed glasses, it was a masterpiece of descriptive effort. She was qualified to judge better than anybody else present, for she had attempted numerous word pictures herself. Along with her admiration for and prejudice in favor of the speaker, she may have noted and been puzzled by a certain calculated restraint in the technique which praised by implication rather than direction. Len never once departed from the impersonal form to state specifically that any one person should bear the lion's share of credit for the achievement.

If she noticed, nobody else did as he slid easily into his peroration. "You asked a while ago where I got that stuff. Now do you see? You all know Anson Dabney. You know he'd make a good assessor." Here Len was handling the full facts for the only time in that effort. "Let's make it unanimous for Anson Dabney. He *came through* on No. 8."

They did—then and at the polls.



The Magic Stone

by H. C. Bailey

THIS IS THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF AMUSING SHORT STORIES ABOUT THE ENTERTAINING ADVENTURES OF MR. REGINALD FORTUNE, DETECTIVE AT LARGE. EACH STORY IS COMPLETE IN ITSELF. WE THINK YOU WILL ENJOY THE WHIMSICAL MR. FORTUNE. . . . . .

A NIGHTINGALE began to sing in the limes. Mr. Fortune smiled through his cigar smoke at the moon and slid lower into his chair. In the silver light his garden was a wonderland. He could see fairies dancing on the lawn. The fine odor of the cigar was glorified by the mingled fragrance of the night, the spicy scent of the lime flowers borne on a wind which came from the river over meadowsweet and hay. The music of the nightingale was heard through the soft murmur of the weir stream.

The head of the criminal investigation department was arguing that the case of the town clerk of Barchester offered an example of the abuse of the simpler poisons in married life.

Mr. Reginald Fortune, though his chief adviser, said no word.

The head of the criminal investigation department came at last to an end. "That's the case, then." He stood up and knocked over his coffee cup. There was a tinkling clatter, a profound silence, and then only the murmur of the water. The nightingale was gone. "Well, Fortune?"

Mr. Fortune sighed and raised himself. "Dear me, Lomas," he said sadly, "why don't you find something to do?"

The Honorable Sidney Lomas suffered from a sense of wrong and said so. It was a difficult and complex case and had given him much anxiety and he wanted Fortune's advice and——

"She did for him, all right," said Reggie Fortune succinctly, "and you'll never find a jury to hang her. Why don't you bring me something interesting?"

Lomas then complained of him, pointing out that a policeman's life was not a happy one, that he did not arrange or even choose the crimes of his country. "Interesting? Good Gad, do you suppose I am interested in this female Bluebeard? I know my job's not interesting. Work's work."

"And eggs is eggs. You have no soul, Lomas," Reggie Fortune stood up. "Come and have a drink." He led the way from the dim veranda into his study

and switched on the light. "Now that," he pointed to a pale, purple fluid, "that is a romantic liqueur: it feels just like a ghost story: I brought it back from the Pyrenees."

"Whisky," said Lomas morosely.

"My dear chap, are we downhearted?"

"You should go to Scotland Yard, Fortune." Lomas clung to his grievance. "Perhaps you would find it interesting. What do you think they brought me this afternoon? Some poor devil had an epileptic fit in the British Museum."

"Well, well," Reggie Fortune sipped his purple liqueur, "the British Museum had made me feel queer. But not epileptic. On the contrary. Sprightly fellow. This is a nice story. Go on, Lomas."

"That's all," Lomas snapped. "Interesting, isn't it?"

"Then why Scotland Yard? You're not a hospital for nervous diseases. Or are you, Lomas?"

"I wonder," said Lomas bitterly. "Why Scotland Yard? Just so. Why? Because they've lost an infernal pebble in the fray. And will I find it for them please? Most interesting case."

Reggie Fortune took another cigar and composed himself for comfort. "Begin at the beginning," he advised, "and relate all facts without passion or recrimination."

"There are no facts, confound you. It was in the ethnological gallery of the British Museum—where nobody ever goes. Some fellow did go and had a fit. He broke one of the glass cases in his convulsions. They picked him up and he came round. He was very apologetic, left them a fiver to pay for the glass and an address in New York. He was an American doing Europe and just off to France with his family. When they looked over the case afterward they found one of the stones it had was gone. The epileptic couldn't have pocketed it in the confusion. Most likely a child. The thing is only a pebble with some paint on it. A pundit from the Museum came to me with his hair on end and wanted me to sift London for it. I asked him what it was worth and he couldn't tell me. Only an anthropologist would want the thing, he said. It seems an acquired taste. I haven't acquired it. I told him this was my busy day."

Reggie Fortune smiled benignly. "But this is art," he said. "This is alluring, Lomas. Have you cabled to New York?"

"Have I——?" Lomas stopped his whisky on the way to his mouth. "No, Fortune, I have not cabled New York. Nor have I sent for the military. The British Museum is still without a garrison."

"Well, you know, this gentleman with the fit may be a collector."

"Oh, Lord, no. It was a real fit. No deception. They had a doctor to him."

Reggie Fortune was much affected. "There speaks the great heart of the people. The doctor always knows! I love your simple faith, Lomas. It cheers me. But I'm a doctor myself. My dear chap, has no one ever murmured into the ear of Scotland Yard that a fit can be faked?"

"I dare say I am credulous," said Lomas. "But I draw the line somewhere. If you ask me to believe that a fellow shammed epilepsy, cut himself and spent a fiver to pick up a pebble, I draw it there."

"That's the worst of credulity. It's always sceptical in the wrong place. What was this pebble like?"

Lomas reached for a writing pad and drew the likeness of a fat cigar, upon which, parallel to each other, were two zigzag lines. "A greenish bit of stone, with those marks in red. That's the museum man's description. If it had been old, which it isn't, it would have been a *galet coloré*. And if it had come

from Australia, which it didn't, it would have been a chu—chu something——"

"Churinga."

"That's the word. The pundit from the Museum says it came from Borneo. They don't know what the marks mean, but the thing is a sort of mascot in Borneo: a high-class insurance policy. The fellow who holds it can't die. So the simple Bornese don't part with their pebbles easily. There isn't another known in Europe. That's where it hurts the Museum pundit. I told him marbles were selling thirty a penny. Nice round marbles, all colors."

"Yes. You have no soul, Lomas."

"I dare say. I'm busy."

"With nothing to show for it!" said Reggie reproachfully. "Green, was it? Green quartz, I suppose, or perhaps jade with the pattern in oxide of iron."

"And I expect some child has swopped it for a green apple."

"Lomas, dear," Mr. Fortune expostulated, "this is romance. Ten thousand years ago the cave men in France painted these patterns on stones. And still in Borneo there's men making them for magic. Big magic. A charm against death. And some bright lad comes down to Bloomsbury and throws a fit to steal one. My hat, he's the heir of all the ages! I could bear to meet this epilept."

"I couldn't," said Lomas. "I have to meet quite enough of the weak minded officially."

But Reggie Fortune was deaf to satire. "A magic stone," he murmured happily.

"Oh, take the case by all means," said Lomas. "I'm glad I've brought you something that really interests you. Let me know when you find the pebble," and announcing that he had a day's work to do on the morrow he went with an air of inquiry to bed.

It was an enemy who said that Mr. Fortune had a larger mass of useless knowledge than any man in England. Mr. Fortune has been heard to explain his eminence in the application of science to crime by explaining that he knows nothing thoroughly, but a little of everything, thus preserving an open mind. This may account for his instant conviction that there was something for him in the matter of the magic stone. Or will you prefer to believe with Superintendent Bell that he has some singular faculty for feeling other men's minds at work, a sort of sixth sense? This is mystical and no one is less mystical than Reggie Fortune.

To the extreme discomfort of Lomas he filled the time which their car took in reaching London with a lecture on the case. He found that three explanations were possible. The stone might have been stolen by some one who believed in its magical power, or by some one who coveted it for a collection, or by some one who meant to sell it to a collector.

"Why stop?" Lomas yawned. "It might have been snapped up by a kleptomaniac, or an ostrich, or a lunatic. Or perhaps some chap wanted to crack a nut. Or an oyster. Does one crack oysters?"

Reggie went on seriously. He thought it unlikely that the thing was stolen as a charm.

"Oh, don't lose heart," said Lomas. "Why not put it down to a brave from Borneo? The original owner comes over in his war paint to claim his long-lost, magic stone. Malay runs amuck in Museum. That would go well in the papers. Very plausible, too. Compare the mysterious Indians who are always hunting down their temple jewels in novels."

"Lomas, you have a futile mind. Of course some fellow might want it for an amulet. It's not only savages who believe in charms. How many men carried a mascot through the war? But your epileptic friend with the New

York address doesn't suggest this simple faith. I suspect a collector."

"Well, I'll believe anything of collectors," Lomas admitted. "They collect heads in Borneo, don't they? I know a fellow who collects shoes. Scalps or stamps or press-cuttings, it's all very sad."

"I want you to cable to New York and verify this epilept. Which I do not think. I'm going to look about for him here."

"My dear Fortune!" Lomas sat up and put up an eyeglass to examine him. "Are you well? This is zeal. But what exactly are you looking for?"

"That's what I want to find out," said Reggie, and having left Lomas at Scotland Yard, he made a round of calls.

It is believed that there is no class or trade, from beggars to bishops, in which Reggie Fortune has not friends. The first he sought was a dealer in exotic curiosities. From him, not without diplomatic suppression of the truth, Mr. Fortune made sure that magic stones from Borneo were nothing accounted of in the trade, seldom seen and never sought. It was obvious that the subject did not interest his dealer who could not tell where Mr. Fortune would find such a thing. Old Demetrius Jacob was as likely a man as any.

"Queer name," said Mr. Fortune.

"Queer fish," he was informed. "Syrian, you know, with a bit of Greek. A lot of odd small stuff goes his way."

Mr. Fortune filed Demetrius Jacob for reference and visited another friend, a wholesale dry-goods man, whose real interest in life was his collection of objects of savage art. A still more diplomatic economy of the truth brought out the fact that the friend did not possess a magic stone of Borneo and would do and pay a good deal to obtain one. He was excited by the mere thought. And Reggie Fortune, watching him as he expanded on the theme of magic stones said to himself: "Yes, old thing, a collector is the nigger in the wood pile." The friend, returning to cold reality, mourned that his collection lacked this treasure and cheered up again at the thought that nobody else had it.

"Nobody?" said Reggie Fortune. "Really?"

The man was annoyed. "Well, I know old Tetherdown hasn't. And he has the best collection in England. Of course with his money he can do anything."

Reggie Fortune neatly diverting the conversation to harmless subjects, consulted his encyclopaedic memory about old Tetherdown.

Lord Tetherdown was a little gentleman of middle age reputed by connoisseurs to be the shabbiest in London. He inherited great wealth and used it by living like a hermit and amassing an anthropological collection. That afternoon saw Reggie Fortune knocking at a little house in a back street of Mayfair. The door was opened by an old woman in an overall. Lord Tetherdown was not at home. Reggie Fortune exhibited great surprise.

"Really? But I counted on seeing him. Can you tell me when he'll be back?"

"No, I can't; he's away."

It appeared to Reggie that she was ill at ease. "Away?" he repeated. "Oh, that's absurd. When did he go?"

"He was off last night."

"Really? But didn't he say when he'd be back?"

"No, he didn't, young man."

"It's amazing."

"I don't know what call you have to be amazed, neither," she cried.

"But I counted on seeing him to-day," Reggie explained. "I had better come in and write a note."

The old woman did not seem to think so, but she let him in and took him to a little room. Reggie Fortune caught

his breath. For the place was ineffably musty. It was also very full. There was hardly space for both him and the woman. Cabinets lined the walls and in the corners, in between the cabinets, on top, on the mantel and the window sill were multitudes of queer things. A large and diabolical mask of red feathers towered above him and he turned from it to see a row of glittering little skulls made of rock crystal and lapis lazuli and carved with hideous realism. On the door hung a cloak made of many-colored bird skins and a necklace of human teeth with the green image of a demon as pendant. A golden dragon with crystal eyes gaped on the sideboard over the whisky decanter.

Reggie showed no surprise. He slid into a chair by the table and looked at the old woman.

"I don't know what you want that you can't say," she grumbled. She unlocked a desk and put before him one sheet of paper, one envelope, pen and ink.

"Well, it's about a curio." Reggie smiled upon her.

"The good Lord knows we've enough of them," she cried. "That's what took him away now."

Reggie showed no interest and naturally while he went on writing that Mr. Fortune was anxious to consult Lord Tetherdown on a matter of anthropology she went on talking. He learned that it was a gentleman coming about a curio who took Lord Tetherdown away the night before and she made it plain that she thought little of gentlemen who came about curios.

"Didn't he say when he would be back?" Reggie asked as he stood up to go.

"Not a word, I tell you."

"Well, that's strange."

"Strange, is it? It's plain you don't know the master, young man. He'd go to the end of kingdom come for his pretties."

"I hope he hasn't gone so far as that," said Reggie. He saw as he turned the corner of the street that she was still looking after him. "She knows more than she says," he told himself, "or she's more rattled than she'll let on." He went to Scotland Yard. Lomas was pleased to see him.

"And how do you like marbles, Fortune?" he said genially. "An intellectual game, I'm told. The glass ones are the trumps now, Bell says. I'm afraid you're old-fashioned. Stone isn't used by the best people."

"Breakin' upon this merry persifage," said Reggie, "have you heard from New York?"

"New York is silent. Probably stunned by your searching question. But the American embassy speaks. Where's that report, Bell?"

Superintendent Bell with an apologetic smile, for he always liked Mr. Fortune, read out: "James L. Beeton is a well-known and opulent citizen now traveling in Europe for his health. Present address not known."

"For his health, mark you," Lomas added.

"Yes. There is some good intelligence work in this business. But not at Scotland Yard."

"He is very harsh with us, Bell. I fear he has had a bad day. The marbles ran badly for him. My dear Fortune, I always told you there was nothing in it."

"You did," said Reggie grimly. "I'll forgive you, but I won't promise to forget. Do you know Lord Tetherdown?"

"The little rag bag who collects rags and bones? He has been a joke this ten years."

"Lord Tetherdown is a very wealthy man," said Superintendent Bell with respect.

"Yes. He's gone. Now Lomas, stemming your cheery wit, apply your mind to this. Yesterday morning a rare specimen was stolen from the British

Museum. Yesterday evening Lord Tetherdown, who collects such things, who hasn't got that particular thing and would pay through the nose to get it, was called on by a man about a curio. Lord Tetherdown went out and vanished."

"My dear fellow!" Lomas put up his eyeglass. "I admire your imagination. But what is it you want me to believe? That Tetherdown arranged for this accursed stone to be stolen?"

"I doubt that," said Reggie thoughtfully.

"So do I. He's a meek, shy little man. Well then, did the thief try to sell it to Tetherdown? Why should that make Tetherdown run away?"

"It might decoy him away."

Lomas stared at him, apparently trying to believe that he was real. "My dear fellow!" he protested. "Oh, my dear fellow! This is fantastic. Why should any one suddenly decoy little Tetherdown? He never made an enemy. He would have nothing on him to steal. It's an old joke that he doesn't carry the worth of a shilling. He has lived in that hovel with his two old fogies of servants for years and sometimes he goes off mysteriously and the fellows in his club only notice he has been away when he blows in again."

"You're a born policeman, Lomas," Reggie sighed. "You're so commonplace."

"Quite, quite," said Lomas heartily. "Now tell me, you've been to Tetherdown's place. Did his servants say they were surprised he had gone off?"

"The old dame said he often went off on a sudden," Reggie admitted, and Lomas laughed. "Well, what about it? You won't do anything?"

"My dear Fortune, I'm only a policeman, as you say. I can't act without some reason."

"Oh, my aunt!" said Reggie. "Reasons! Good night. Sleep sound."

In comfortable moments since he has been heard to confess that Lomas was perfectly right, that there was nothing which the police could have done, but he is apt to diverge into an argument that policemen are creatures whose function in the world is to shut the stable door after the horse is stolen. A pet theory of his.

He went to the most solemn of his clubs and having soothed his feelings with muffins, looked up Lord Tetherdown in the peerage. The house of Tetherdown took little space. John William, Lord Tetherdown, had no male kin alive but his heir, who was his half brother, the Honorable Bishop Coppett. The Honorable George seemed from his clubs to be a sportsman. Mr. Fortune meditated.

On his way home he called on the Honorable George, whose taste in dwellings and servants was different from his half-brother's. Mr. Coppett had a flat in a vast, new, and gorgeous block. His door was opened by a young man who used a good tailor and was very wide awake. But Mr. Coppett, like Lord Tetherdown, was not at home. His man, looking more knowing than ever, did not think it would be of any use to call again. Oh, no sir, Mr. Coppett was not out of town; he would certainly be back that night; but something like a wink flickered on the young man's face—too late to see any one. If the gentleman would call up in the morning—not too early——

Reggie Fortune said that it didn't much matter.

He went off to dine with her whom he describes as his friskier sister. The one who married a bishop. It made him sleep sound.

Thus the case of the magic stone was left to ferment for some fifteen hours. For which Mr. Fortune has been heard to blame himself and the conjugal bliss of bishops.

Over a deviled sole at breakfast—

nature demanded piquant food—his mind again became active. He rang for his car. Sam, his admirable chauffeur, was told that he preferred to drive himself, which is always in him a sign of mental excitement.

"Country work, sir?" Sam asked anxiously, for he holds that only on Salisbury Plain should Mr. Fortune be allowed to drive. Mr. Fortune shook his head, and Sam swallowed and they came down upon Oxford Street like the wolf on the fold. The big car was inserted, a camel into the eye of a needle, into the alleyway where Lord Tetherdown's house lurks.

Again the old woman in the overall was brought to the door. She recognized Reggie Fortune and liked him less than ever.

"There's no answer," she cired. "The master's not back."

"Really?"

"You heard what I said."

"He's not let you know when he's coming back?"

"No, he hasn't. nor I've no call to tell you if he had. You and your curios!" The door slammed.

Reggie went back to his car. When it stopped again in a shabby street by Covent Garden, Sam allowed himself to cough, his one protest from first to last. A devoted fellow. Reggie Fortune surveyed the shop of Demetrius Jacob, which displayed in its dirty window shelves covered with bad imitations of old pewter. Reggie frowned at it, looked at the name again and went in.

The place was like a lumber room. He saw nothing but damaged furniture which had never been good and little of that until he found out that the dusty thing on which he was standing was an exquisite Chinese carpet. Nobody was in the shop, nobody came, though the opening door had rung a bell. He made it ring again and still had to wait. Then there swept through the place a woman, a big woman and handsome in her dark, Oriental way. She did not see Reggie, she was too hurried or too angry, if her flush and her frown were anger. She banged the door and was gone.

Reggie rapped on a rickety desk. After a moment an old man shuffled into the shop, made something like a salaam and said: "You want? Yes?" Not so old after all, Reggie decided on a second glance. He shuffled because his slippers were falling off, he was bent because he cringed, his yellow face was keen and healthy and his eyes bright under black brows, but certainly a queer figure in that tight frock coat which came nearly to his heels and his stiff green skull cap.

"Mr. Jacob?" Reggie said.

"I am Demetrius Jacob." He pronounced it in the Greek way.

"Well, I am interested in savage religions, you know, and I'm told you are the man for me." Mr. Jacob again made salaam. "What I'm after just now is charms and amulets." He paused and suddenly rapped out: "Have you got anything from Borneo?"

Demetrius Jacob showed no surprise or any other emotion. "Borneo? Oh, yes, I t'ink," he smiled. "Beautiful t'ings." He shuffled to a cupboard and brought out a tray which contained two skulls and a necklace of human teeth.

Reggie Fortune was supercilious. He demanded amulets, stone amulets and in particular a stone amulet like a cigar with zigzag painting.

Demetrius Jacob shook his head. "I not 'ave 'im," he said sadly. "Not from Borneo. I 'ave beautiful *galets colorés* from France, yes, and Russia. But not the East. I never see 'im from the East but in the Museum."

Reggie Fortune went away thinking that it took a clever fellow to be as guileless as that.

The car plunged through Piccadilly again to the flat of the Honorable

George Coppett. Mr. Coppett's man received him with a smile which was almost a leer. "I'll see, sir," he took Reggie's card. "I'm afraid Mr. Coppett's partic'larly busy."

As Reggie was ushered in he heard a bell ring and a woman's voice high and angry, "Oh, yes, I will go. But I do not believe you, not one word." A door was flung open and across the hall swept the big woman of Demetrius Jacob's shop. She stopped and stared hard at Reggie. Either she did not recognize him or did not care who he was. She hurried out and the door banged behind her.

The Honorable George Coppett was a little man who walked like a bird. "Damn it, damn it," he piped jumping about, "what the devil are you at, Brown?" He stared at Mr. Fortune and Brown gave him Mr. Fortune's card. "Hallo, don't know you, do I? I'm in the devil of a hurry."

"I think you had better see me, Mr. Coppett," said Reggie. Mr. Coppett swore again and bade him come in.

Mr. Coppett gave himself some whisky. "I say, women are the devil," he said as he wiped his mouth. "Have one?" he nodded to the decanter. "No? Well, what's your trouble, Mr. Fortune?"

"I am anxious to have some news of Lord Tetherdown."

"Well, why don't you ask him?" Mr. Coppett laughed.

"He's not to be found."

"What, gone off again, has he? Lord, he's always at it. My dear chap, he's simply potty about his curious. I don't know the first thing about them, but it beats me how a fellow can fall for that old junk. One of the best and all that don't you know, but it's a mania with him. He's always running off after some queer bit of tripe."

"When do you expect him back?"

"My dear chap, he don't tell me his little game. Old Martha might know."

"She doesn't."

Mr. Coppett laughed again. "He always was a close old thing. He just pushes off, don't you know, on any old scent. And after a bit he blows in again."

"Then—you don't know—when you'll see him again?" Reggie said slowly.

"Give you my word I don't," Mr. Coppett cried. "Sorry, sorry."

"So am I," said Reggie. "Good morning, Mr. Coppett."

Mr. Coppett did not try to keep him. But he was hardly beyond the outer door of the flat when he heard Mr. Coppett say, "Hallo, hallo!" He turned. The door was still shut. Mr. Coppett was using the telephone. He heard "Millfield, double three something," and could not hear anything more. Mr. Fortune went downstairs pensively.

Pensive he was still when he entered Scotland Yard and sought Lomas' room.

"Well, how goes the quest for the holy stone?" Lomas put up his eyeglass. "My dear Fortune, you're the knight of the rueful countenance."

"You're confused, Lomas. Don't do it," Reggie complained. "You're not subtle at Scotland Yard, but hang it, you might be clear."

"What can we do for you?"

"One of your larger cigars." Reggie mumbled and took it. "Yes. What can you do? I wonder." He looked at Lomas with a baleful eye. "Who lives at Millfield? Speaking more precisely, who lives at Millfield double three something?" Lomas suggested that it was a large order. "It is," Reggie agreed gloomily. "It's a nasty large order." And he described his morning's work. "There you are. The further you go the queerer."

"Quite, quite," Lomas nodded. "But what's your theory, Fortune?"

"The workin' hypothesis is that there's dirty work doin' when a magic

stone gets stolen and the man who wants the magic stone vanishes on the same day; which is confirmed when a female connected with a chap who knows all about magic stones is found colloguing with the vanished man's heir; and further supported when that heir, being rattled, runs to telephone to the chaste shades of Millfield—the last place for a sporting blood like him to keep his pals. I ask you, who lives at Millfield double three something?"

Lomas shifted his papers. "George Coppett stands to gain by Tetherdown's death, of course," he said. "And the only man so far as we know. But he's not badly off, he's well known, there's never been anything against him. Why should he suddenly plan to do away with his brother? All your story might be explained in a dozen ways. There's not an ounce of evidence, Fortune."

"You like your evidence after the murder. I know that. My God, Lomas, I'm afraid."

"My dear fellow!" Lomas was startled. "This isn't like you."

"Oh, many thanks. I don't like men dying, that's all. Professional prejudice. I'm a doctor, you see. What the devil are we talking for? Who lives at Millfield double three something?"

"We might get at it," Lomas said doubtfully, and rang for Superintendent Bell. "But it's a needle in a bundle of hay. And if Tetherdown was to be murdered, it's done by now."

"Yes, that's comforting," said Mr. Fortune.

Superintendent Bell brought a list of the subscribers to the Millfield exchange and they looked over the names in the thirty-fourth hundred. Most were shopkeepers and ruled out. "He doesn't buy his fish in Millfield," said Reggie Fortune. Over the doctors he hesitated.

"You think it's some fellow in your own trade?" Lomas smiled.

"Brownrigg," Reggie Fortune muttered. "I know him. 3358, Doctor Jerdan, the Ferns, Chatham Park Road. Where's a medical directory? 3358, Doctor Jerden is not in the medical directory. Call up the divisional inspector and ask him what he knows about Doctor Jerdan."

There was nothing, Superintendent Bell announced, known against Doctor Jerdan. He had been at the Ferns some time. He didn't practice. He was said to take in private patients.

"Come on," said Reggie Fortune and took the superintendent's arm.

"My dear Fortune," Lomas protested. "This is a bow at a venture. We can't act, you know. Bell can't appear."

"Bell's coming to be a policeman and appear when it's all over. I'm going in to Doctor Jerdan who isn't on the register. And I don't like it, Lomas. Bell shall stay outside. And if I don't come out again—well, you'll have evidence, Lomas."

Neither Reggie Fortune nor his chauffeur knew the way about in Millfield. They sat together and Mr. Fortune with a map of London exhorted Sam at the wheel and behind them Superintendent Bell held tight and Reggie thought of his sins.

The car came by many streets of little drab houses to a road in which the houses were large and detached, houses which had been rural villas when Victoria was queen. "Now go easy," Reggie Fortune said. "Chatham Park Road, Bell. Quiet and respectable as the silent tomb. My God, look at that! Stop, Sam."

What startled him was a hospital nurse on a doorstep.

"Who is she, sir?" Bell asked.

"She's Demetrius Jacob's friend and George Coppett's friend—and now she's Doctor Jerdan's friend and in nurse's rig. Keep the car back here. Don't frighten them."

He jumped out and hurried on to the Ferns. "I don't like it, young fellow, and that's a fact," said Bell, and Sam nodded.

The woman had been let in. Mr. Fortune stood a moment surveying the house which was as closely curtained as all the rest and like them stood back with a curving drive to the door. He rang the bell, had no answer, rang again, knocked and knocked more loudly. It sounded thunderous in the heavy quiet of the Chatham Park Road.

At last the door was opened by a man, a lanky, powerful fellow who scowled at Mr. Fortune and said: "We ain't deaf."

"I have been kept waiting," said Reggie. "Doctor Jerdan, please."

"Not at home."

"Oh, I think so. Doctor Jerdan will see me."

"Don't see any one but by appointment."

"Doctor Jerdan will see me. Go and tell him so." The door was shut in his face. After a moment or two he began knocking again. It was made plain to all the Chatham Park Road that something was happening at the Ferns and here and there a curtain fluttered.

Superintendent Bell got out of the car. "You stay here, son," he said. "Don't stop the engine."

But before he reached the house, the door was opened and Reggie Fortune saw a sleek man who smiled with all his teeth. "So sorry you have been waiting," he purred. "I am Doctor Jerdan's secretary. What can I do for you?"

"Doctor Jerdan will see me."

"Oh, no, I'm afraid not. Doctor Jerdan's not at home."

"Why say so?" said Reggie wearily. "Doctor Jerdan, please."

"You had better tell me your business, sir."

"Haven't you guessed? Lord Tetherdown."

"Lord who?" said the sleek man. "I don't know anything about Lord Tetherdown."

"But then you're only Doctor Jerdan's secretary," Reggie murmured.

Something of respect was to be seen in the pale eyes that studied him. "I'll see what I can do. Come in, sir. What's your name?" He thrust his head forward like an animal snapping, but still he smiled.

"Fortune. Reginald Fortune."

"This way." The sleek man led him down a bare hall and showed him into a room at the back. "Do sit down, Mr. Fortune. But I'm afraid you won't see Doctor Jerdan." He slid out. Reggie heard the key turn in the lock. He glanced at the window. That was barred.

"Quite so," said Reggie. "Now how long will Bell wait?"

He took his stand so that he would be behind the door if it were opened and listened. There was a scurry of feet and some other sound. The feet fell silent, the other sound became a steady tapping. "Good God, are they nailing him down?" he muttered, took up a chair and dashed it at the lock again and again. As he broke out he heard the beat of a motor engine.

Superintendent Bell, drawing near, saw a car with two men come up out of the garage of the Ferns. He ran into the road and stood in its way. It drove straight at him, gathering speed. He made a jump for the footboard and being a heavy man missed. The car shot by.

The respectability of Chatham Park Road then heard such a stream of swearing as never had flowed that way. For Sam has a mother's love of his best car. But he was heroic. He swung its long body out across the road, swearing. The fugitives from the Ferns took a chance. Their car mounted the pavement, hit a gate post and crashed.

Superintendent Bell arrived to find Sam backing his own car to the curb while he looked complacently at its shining sides. "Not a scratch, praise God," he said.

Superintendent Bell pulled up. "You're a wonder, you are," he said and gazed at the ruins. The smashed car was on its side in a jumble of twisted iron and bricks. The driver was underneath. They could not move him. There were reasons why that did not matter to him. "He's got his," said Sam. "Where's the other? There were two of them."

The other lay half hidden in a laurel hedge. He had been flung out, he had broken the railings with his head, he had broken the stone below, but his head was a gruesome shape.

In the hall of the Ferns Reggie Fortune stood still to listen. That muffled tapping was the only sound in the house. It came from below. He went down dark stairs into the kitchen. No one was there. The sound came from behind a doorway in the corner. He flung it open and looked down into the blackness of a cellar. He struck a light and saw a bundle lying on the ground, a bundle from which stuck out two feet that tapped at the cellar steps. He brought it up to the kitchen. It was a woman with her head and body in a sack. When he had cut her loose he saw the dark face of the woman of the shop and the flat. She sprang at him and grasped his arms. "Who are you?" she cried. "Where is Lord Tetherdown?"

"My name is Fortune, madame. And yours?"

"I am Melitta Jacob. What is that to you? Where have you put Lord Tetherdown?"

"I am looking for him."

"You! Is he not here? Oh, you shall pay for it, you and those others!"

But Reggie was already running upstairs. One room and another he tried in vain and at last at the top of the house found a locked door. The key was in the lock. Inside on a pallet bed, but clothed, lay a little man with some days' beard. The woman thrust Reggie away and flung herself down by the bedside and gathered the man to her bosom moaning over him. "My lord, my lord."

"Oh, my aunt!" said Reggie Fortune. "Now, Miss Jacob, please." He put his hand on her shoulder.

"He is mine," she cried fiercely.

"Well, just now he's mine. I'm a doctor."

"Oh, is he not dead?" she cried.

"Not exactly," said Reggie Fortune. "Not yet." He took the body from her quivering arms.

"What is it, then?"

"He is drugged, and, I should say, starved. If you——" A heavy footstep drew near. She sprang up ready for battle and in the doorway fell upon Superintendent Bell.

"Easy, easy." He received her on his large chest and made sure of her wrists. "Mr. Fortune—just got in by the window—what about this?"

"That's all right," Reggie mumbled from the bed. "Send me Sam."

"Coming, sir!" Sam ran in. "Those fellows didn't do a get-away. They're outed. Car smash. Both killed. Some smash."

"Brandy, meat juice, ammonia," murmured Mr. Fortune, who was writing, "and that. Hurry."

"Beg pardon, ma'am." Bell detached himself from Melitta Jacob. He took off his hat and tiptoed to the bed. "Have they done for him, sir?" he muttered.

Mr. Fortune was again busy over the senseless body. One of its hands was clenched. He opened the fingers gently and drew out a greenish lump painted

with a zigzag pattern in red. "The magic stone," he said. "A charm against death. Well, well."

On his lawn which slopes to the weir stream Reggie Fortune lay in a deck chair and a syringa, waxen white, shed its fragrance about him. He opened his eyes to see the jaunty form of the Honorable Sidney Lomas tripping toward him.

"Stout fellow," he murmured. "That's cider cup. There was ice in it once." And he shut his eyes again.

"I infer that the patient is out of your hands."

"They're going for their honeymoon to Nigeria."

"Good gad!" said Lomas.

"Collecting, you see. The objects of art of the noble savage. She's rather a dear."

"I should have thought he'd done enough collecting. Does he understand yet what happened."

"Oh, he's quite lucid. Seems to think it's all very natural."

"Does he though?"

"Only he's rather annoyed with brother George. He thinks brother George had no right to object to his marrying. That's what started it, you see. Brother George came round to borrow his usual hundred or so and found him with the magnificent Melitta. It occurred to brother George that if Tetherdown was going to marry something had to be done about it. And then I suppose brother George consulted the late Jerdan." Mr. Fortune opened his eyes. "By the way, who was Jerdan? I saw you hushed up the inquest as a motor smash."

"Bell thinks he was the doctor who bolted out of the Antony case."

"Oh, ah. Yes, there was some brains in that. I rather thought the late Jerdan had experience. I wonder what happened to his private patients at the Ferns. Creepy house. I say, was it Jerdan or his man who threw the fit at the Museum?"

"Jerdan himself, by the description."

"Yes. Useful thing, medical training. Well, Jerdan saw he could get at Tetherdown through his hobby. He came with tales of anthropological treasures for sale. The old boy didn't bite at first. Jerdan couldn't hit on anything he wanted. But he found out at last what he did want. Hence the fit in the Museum. That night Jerdan turned up with the Borneo stone and told Tetherdown a friend of his had some more of the kind. Tetherdown fell for that. He went off to the Ferns with Jerdan. The last thing he remembers is sitting down in the back room to look at the stone. They chloroformed him, I think. There was lots of stuff in the place. Then they kept him under morphia and starved him. I suppose the notion was to dump his dead body somewhere so that the fact of his death could be established and George inherit.

"There could be no clear evidence of murder. Tetherdown is eccentric. It would look as if he had gone off his head and wandered about till he died of starvation. That was the late Jerdan's idea. Melitta always thought George was a bad egg. He didn't like her, you see, and he showed it. When Tetherdown vanished, she went off to George one time. He laughed at her, which was his error. She put on that nurse's rig for a disguise and watched his rooms. When I rattled him and he rang up Jerdan, Jerdan came there and she followed him back to the Ferns and asked for Tetherdown. Jolly awkward for Jerdan with me knocking at the door. He was crude with her, but I don't know that I blame him. An able fellow. Pity, pity. Yes. What happened to brother George?"

"Bolted. We haven't a trace of him. Which is just as well, for there's no evidence. Jerdan left no papers. He

could have laughed at us if he had had the nerve."

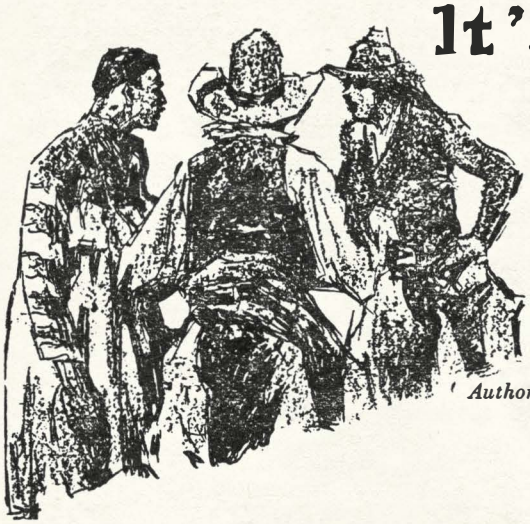
Reggie Fortune chuckled. "I never liked George. I called him up that night: 'Mr. George Coppett? The Ferns speaking. It's all out,' and I hung up. I thought George would quit. George will be worrying quite a lot. So that's that."

"Yes, you have your uses, Fortune," said Lomas. "I've noticed it before."

Reggie Fortune fumbled in his pocket and drew out the magic stone. "Tetherdown said he would like me to have it. Cut him to the heart to give it up, poor old boy. Told me it saved my life." He smiled. "I don't care for its methods, myself. Better put it back in a glass case, Lomas."

"What did Melitta give you?"

"Melitta is rather a dear," said Mr. Fortune.



It's Wrong to Fight

by Miles Overholt

Author of "It Was All in the Papers," "No Savvy," etc.

OLD MAN BEEBE HAD A PET HYENA. IT WAS A NICE LITTLE PET. DO YOU KNOW ANY PARTICULAR HYENA? . . . . . .

THE story about the mud turtle beating a jack rabbit in a race, now—it never excited me much. Anybody knows there's more than one way of skinning a rabbit.

Generally speaking, I don't care much for them little animal stories—they all point out such silly morals, the principal one being that the guys that write them are such awful liars.

Me, I don't know much about animals, excepting mebbe cows and bronks, but I picked up quite a bit of knowledge lately about a couple of other varmints, which knowledge ain't doing me a particle of good. I don't know but it hurts me a little here and there.

Old man Beebe started it. The old man is quite a hand to have pets around him—I guess his mother was scared by a menagerie or something—and he used to gather up animals like gila monsters, scorpions, a couple of monkeys, and a parrot. The old man's oldest son, Ford, joined up with a circus once and he used to keep the old gent supplied with them silly things.

And one day Ford sent his dad a hyena, which was one of the ugliest animals I ever met—a kind of a striped animal, it was, with a disposition worse than old man Beebe's. But they made a fine pair, only the old man wasn't striped, and folks used to drop around to see 'em both, but especially the hyena. I liked the hyena best, too.

The only thing I liked about old man Beebe was his daughter, Flora. And so did everybody else, including Doug Turner, a kind of a tillicum of mine, we both being employed as hired men by old man Wortham, who owns the Bar-T brand.

I reckon I asked Flora at least twice a week for three years would she up and marry me one of these warm spring days, and all the answer I got was a sort of a giggle, which is no way to answer a darn serious personal question like that. And Doug, he didn't get any more encouraging replies to his apt query of a similar nature, either.

She told us a time or two to go and ask her dad what he thought about the

matter, which no sober or sane person would do, because the old man Beebe had already explained about that.

"Before that gal o' mine marries a low-down cow-puncher, I will jes' nachelly up and kill her," he said more'n a dozen times. "She knows better, herself, but I'm just awarnin' any hombre that gets any such fool notion into his haid."

And I don't know of any kind of an argument to beat that. That is one reason why I liked the hyena better than I liked old man Beebe. And I wasn't any too fond of the hyena.

But it didn't stop us from going right to headquarters and talking to Flora about it, the old man thinking we had come to see the hyena, and one day the old man met us all excited about something.

"I got the fightingest animile in the State," he said. "Didn't discover it till yistiddy. C'mere."

Then the old fool showed us the hyena.

"Shucks," I said, "we've seen that darn thing a hundred times. What about it?"

"What about it! Huh! He licked three o' my best fightin' dogs yistiddy," said old man Beebe.

"See if I care," I told him. "You got to expect that. He was born to fight—like a bartender."

"But look at his size!" yiped the old man. "He wasn't born to up an' lick a whole pack o' dogs. He's small."

"Your dogs can't fight," said Doug. "I'll bet a coyote can lick him with one hand tied behind him."

"Bring on your coyote," flared up the old man. "I'll bet my hyenar can lick three of 'em."

"What you want to bet?" I asked him. "Mebbe you're trying to talk sense. Personally, I'll bet that there hyena has absorbed your disposition and wouldn't fight nobody unless somebody was trying to get a nickel away from him."

"I'll bet most anything—most anything in reason," said old man Beebe. Then he thought about something and said: "Gimme a few days till I try him out on a few other dogs—then I'll talk bet."

"He only wants a cinch," I said to Doug. "Give that man a sure thing and he's the greatest gambler you ever saw. He's rough, too. I'll bet he would wager a dime on the game of pussy-wants-a-corner—if he was real sure of winning."

But the old man, he only grunted and turned away. Then Doug and I, we went in to see what kind of a smile Flora had on tap for the day.

A couple of weeks later we met old man Beebe again and he said if we had any coyotes that thought they could fight to bring 'em on. He said his hyena had licked a timber wolf, and the next day he put four coyotes—which Jim Beggs had loaned him for the festive occasion—into the hyena's pen and only one of 'em came out alive.

"I'm willin' to bet most anything you fellers care to put up now," said old man Beebe. "I got quite a lot of confidence in my hyenar."

"Yeh? What do you want to fight him against?" Doug asked him. "We was thinking of training a cyclone to scrap—would that be all right with you?"

"It's got to be a animile o' some kind," said the old man. "Mebbe a wolf or somethin'."

"Well, mebbe we'll find something," I said. "How would a brown toy Teddy Bear do, or a hookworm?"

"You go an' get your fightingest animile an' then come an' we'll talk sense," the old man said, and walked away.

"We'll bring over a goldfish," I yiped at him as he went into the barn.

Flora told us that she never saw the

old man so earnest about anything, except mebbe her marrying a cowpuncher, as he was about that hyena.

"I never heard of him offering to bet before," she said. "I believe he's getting childish."

"Childish! Huh! He's getting tadpolish," said Doug. "He never was a child; the son-of-a-gun was born a fish."

"You're talking about my father!" scolded Flora.

"I know it," answered Doug. "But he talks about *me!*"

"Yes—that's true. And he says a lot worse things than calling you—a—fish," Flora gurgled.

"Well, then!" said Doug.

Both of us asked Flora did she think she could manage it somehow so she could marry one or the other of us one of these fine days, and she said she couldn't just see how it could be done. We might ask her father if he could think of any way of bringing it about, she said.

And that is where we got onto our mustangs and started for home.

"Tell you what let's do," said Doug after a while. "Let's find some kinda fighting animal that can lick that darn hyena and take the old man's ranch plumb away from him—and then laugh in his face."

"But mebbe there ain't no such animal," I said to him. "Mebbe that hyena is a regular fighting fool."

"Of course it is. The old man wouldn't take no chances if it wasn't. But I never heard of no hyena licking Jack Dempsey," answered Doug. "There is always somebody that can lick somebody else."

Well, sir, we took old man Wortham into our confidence and he said a hyena wasn't much of a fighter, so far as he knew. He said they was a kind of a hog, he thought, and hogs ain't much on the fight.

But we told him this hyena was and it wasn't a hog; it was more like a dog and a badger combined—a kind of a—hyena, we said.

The old man said he bet there were plenty of dogs around the country that could lick the hyena, but if the old man Beebe was betting the other way, why, we'd do well to find a regular he-fighter.

Which is what we started out to do—only Jess Willard was too busy cutting wheat, or something, and we couldn't find a buzz saw that wasn't working, either.

"Mebbe the old tightwad wouldn't bet nothing, anyway," I said to Doug. "We ought to find out how much money we can garner from him before we go and worry ourselves sick looking for something that ain't got any better sense than to fight."

And Doug allowed it wasn't a silly idea, so we went over to old man Beebe's to see what kind of a gurgle Flora was wearing that sunshiny day.

"You fellers got your fightin' animile yit?" the old man wanted to know right off.

"We sure have," Doug told him. "We got a—a—dog that can lick your hyena on a postage stamp. Our dog is a fightin' fool, and we got the dough to back up every little thing he undertakes."

"Well, now, that's right interestin'." said the old man Beebe. "'Specially that part about the money. How much of it do you-all think you can afford to lose?"

"None of it," answered Doug. "That's what I'm talking about—we don't aim to lose none on our dog. He ain't that kind of an animal. He's got a fighting pedigree as long as a clothesline."

"What kind of a dog is he?" wondered the old man.

"He's—a—a sooner dog," answered Doug, trying to think of some

kind of a name for a dog. "He'd sooner fight than not."

"Oh," said old man Beebe.

"Well, how about a little bet of, say, a couple of thousand dollars?" asked Doug, winking at me in an ungentlemanly manner. "We got that kind of a dog."

"Well," pondered the old man, "mebbe you better let me try my hyenar out on a half a dozen fightin' dogs first. Mebbe I ain't quite ready to bet."

Which is the way old man Beebe is. All he wants is a lead-pipe cinch and a sure thing nailed down, cemented, glued, and the papers made out in his name. He certainly would have been a fine European diplomat.

We asked Flora what she thought about it and she said her dad was getting plumb goofy about his hyena.

"Why," she said, "he thinks the hyena is a reincarnation of David, the man that shot Goliath."

"He didn't shoot him," said Doug. "He stabbed him, or something."

"I mean the Bible David," smiled Flora.

"Oh, I guess I didn't know him," said Doug. "I was thinking of Joe David from over on the Piceance."

"Will your old man bet any money on the fighting qualities of his animal?" I asked Flora, and she said she thought mebbe he would.

"And when he does," she said, "he will know what he's doing. Dad doesn't invest money—he only uses it for bait."

We asked Flora had she figgered out any scheme by which Doug or I could marry her one of these summer days and she said she hadn't. Her dad, though—mebbe he had, she said.

When we were on the way home I asked Doug:

"What did you go and tell old man Beebe we owned a fighting dog for? Now, we can't ring in anything else."

"Gosh, that's all I could think of at the time," answered Doug. "I wanted to try him out and I couldn't think of nothing but dog. We might get a lion and shave him, or something, and call him Fido," he said, kind of thoughtful.

Old man Wortham he doesn't like old man Beebe, either, so he told Doug and I to take a few days off and see could we scare up a fighting dog, which we started out to do, and it was like looking for a haystack in the eye of a needle.

There were plenty of dogs around the country, but old man Beebe's hyena had licked 'em all. Yes, ma'am, the old man had gone all over the county defying every kind of an animal there was, and there wasn't anything hardly that had a whole ear left to its name. That hyena had turned itself into a mincemeat factory, and owners of dogs and things pretty nearly chased us off with large guns, they were that wrought up.

So we had to go somewheres else and see what we could do. Which wasn't much, because it was something we never had worked as hired men at. And if you ain't ever been trained to find fighting dogs, how you going to go about it?

Which is how come we found the fightingest dog in the world, I guess. If we had been trained fighting dog finders we wouldn't have looked where we did—we would have been looking for dogs instead of going to a show at Santa Fe.

Still and all, it was a dog and pony show and it showed real good sense in Doug and me going to a dog show to look for a dog, didn't it? That's the way we figgered it, too.

Well, sir, it was a clown that owned this here fighting bloodhound. He was a kind of a cross between a bloodhound and a wolf, or something, and he just naturally hated things like everybody had done him dirt at some time or another and he wasn't over it.

The clown, he came out and said if

anybody thought he had a dog, sheep, cow, lion, tiger, or anything that could lick his dog he would be glad to talk business during business hours. He said his dog had licked everything that thought it could fight, including three humane societies, and the dog bowed to the audience. Yes, ma'am, he was a real smart dog, and nobody argued different.

He was educated up, too, he doing a number of cute tricks in a mad sort of a way, and the folks clapping their hands. Then, just to show how smart the dog was, the clown told a dog joke on him—some kind of a silly joke, it was making the dog the goat—and then when nobody could see how funny it was, why, the clown, he busted out laughing like it was the funniest thing he ever heard. And the dog, he acted like he was so ashamed of being joked that he couldn't stand it to live, so he lay down and pretended he was dead. Then the clown, he went and started across the stage, tripped on the dog and fell over on him. But the darn dog, he just lay still and acted dead. Then, of course, everybody laughed.

Doug and I, we waited around till after the show was over, and then we hunted up the clown. We asked him some questions of importance, and he showed us clippings and prizes and things, proving that his dog had licked a couple of bulls in Mexico, a half dozen lions in Russia, a tiger in Japan, and every kind of a dog in the world in this country—wherever they would allow 'em to pull off a fight like that.

The show was in town for a week, and we went into a business session with the clown. We told him all about old man Beebe and his hyena, and would he let his dog fight him for five hundred dollars. And he said he would.

Then we went back and talked to old man Wortham.

Well, sir, the old man, being sore at old man Beebe, went and got the money and we rode over to see Flora's dad.

He was ready to bet, too, which we figgered he would be, and he said to bring on our dog. We asked him how much dough he wanted to argue with and he said about five thousand dollars.

Gosh! You could have knocked us over with a brick, we were that surprised. Old man Beebe wanting to bet five thousand dollars!

Then Doug thought of something, and he said it.

"If you don't mind me getting kind of personal and domestical," he said, "I'd like to make a real sporting proposition out of this—just to see if you're a regular sport or a bluffer."

"When it comes to bettin' on this here hyenar they ain't nothin' too expensive fer me to talk about," said the old man.

"O. K.," said Doug. "If Flora is willing, will you withdraw your objections to her marrying a cow-puncher if your hyena gets licked?"

The old man turned kind of white for a minute, swallowed a chaw of tobacco, and then turned and looked Doug plumb in the eye. I thought at first he was going to snap a cap at him, but he kept his hand off'n his gun. Then he said:

"Yes—I'm willin' even to do that, if you-all put up the five thousand dollars."

Well, sir, it was all we could do to keep from yelling, we were that tickled. There wasn't no way in the world to keep our dog from killing that hyena—we knew that. So did old man Wortham, after he had seen the dog and talked to the clown.

"I'll take three thousand dollars of the bet, and lend you boys the two thousand," he said, without us even asking him to, which we would have done, anyway.

Then we went over to Santa Fe and brought the clown and his dog over to the ranch.

We didn't dast tell Flora about the old man betting her, or she would have

got sore, so we didn't tell her anything, only that one of us figgered on marrying her one of these balmy days, and she wanted to know which one, and we said we didn't know yet.

We said mebbe we would draw straws for her, and she giggled and asked could she hold the straws, and we said she could.

Everybody in the county, pretty near, were at old man Beebe's place the day of the fight. I guess he had sent 'em word, or something, because we hadn't told nobody, except mebbe eight or ten of the boys. And there was a good deal of betting on the fighters, too, the hyena getting the small end of it after everybody had seen our dog.

But shucks, anybody would have bet on the dog. Just to look at him was aplenty. I'll bet there ain't a meaner-looking bloodhound in the world than that one was, and he was just as mean as he looked.

But it didn't scare old man Beebe none. He had the money and then some. Yes, ma'am, he put up the five thousand and then asked us did we have any more, and we had to say we didn't have. So some of the other fellows, knowing old man Wortham, said they'd bet a few, and they did.

Flora didn't come out to the corral to see the fight. She said it was brutal, but she laughed when she said it. Only it wasn't no place for a lady, she figgered, I guess. Which it wasn't.

The clown, he put up the five hundred dollars he had got from us against five hundred of old man Beebe's, and Joe Bogue, the banker over at Hooker Junction, held the stakes.

Nobody else, of course, knew about Flora being bet on the hyena, but we did, you betcha—Doug and me—which was about all we cared about. Of course, a thousand dollars apiece would be a pretty fair stake to get married on, Doug and I having agreed to lend the other one his thousand if Flora wanted a certain one of us, and everything looked kind of jake that nice, sun-filled morning.

Before the fight Doug and I we went in and talked to Flora a few minutes, asking her how about marrying one or the other of us, and she said she didn't hardly know what to say, it being so sudden, but that if we would ask her dad, she believed he would let us know definite.

Old man Beebe got a couple of ropes on his hyena and three or four of the punchers helped him lead the darn thing into the corral, and it took 'em an hour to get the ropes off, he was that bad.

The bloodhound was rarin' to go all the time, but he was pretty well trained, and the clown, who didn't look like one now, held him back easy enough. When old man Beebe said his animal was ready, why, we opened the gate and said, "Sic 'em!"

Well, sir, there wasn't any question about it now. That hyena didn't have a chance. Our dog just naturally tore into him like a hired man at the dinner table, and the hyena seemed to suspect that something was wrong. He looked around in a hurt sort of a way as if to say somebody had done some switching on him. He seemed to think it wasn't fair.

But we did. Yes, ma'am, Doug and I, we were quite gleeful and we said words of a kidding nature to old man Beebe. We asked him how come he got the idea his hyena could fight. Somebody, we told him, must have been spoofing him. Was he sure, we asked him, did he have the right animal? Mebbe he meant to bring in his old tomcat, we said, soothing like.

The old man wasn't none too happy, either. He got all white and nervous, and he could see all the money in the world slipping right out of his pocket, and he kind of wished he hadn't been so hasty, it looked like. He didn't an-

swer us when we kidded him, only walking around the corral so's he could get a better look at his fast-losing fighting hyena.

Well, sir, our dog was doing his best, and that was aplenty. All the fellows who had bet on him were plumb joyful and it looked like it was going to be quite a happy day.

The hyena was going to be killed, too, you could see that. There wasn't enough left of him right at that moment to wad a shotgun, hardly.

"Go on in—kill 'im!" yelled the clown, and the bloodhound took his word for it and started right in to do that same.

The hyena kind of suspected some such thing, too, I guess, because he dashed over into a corner and—laughed!

Yes, ma'am, that's the way hyenas do when they're licked, some one said. It sounds like they were laughing, only it's a kind of a give-up cry. But it sounds like laughing.

Right there everything changed. Our dog, he went and flopped over on the ground and lay there like he was dead—and the hyena, he went and took a mean advantage of the situation and chawed a hole in the bloodhound's throat before anybody could stop him.

Yes, sir, in three minutes our dog was dead. The hyena had split his neck open with his scissorlike teeth, and old man Beebe nearly fell off the fence with gladness!

Well, what could you expect? The dog had been trained to play dead when the other performer laughed, hadn't he? How were we to know the darn hyena would up and laugh at such a critical time!

On top of the money we owe old man Wortham, the clown sued us for ten thousand dollars for the death of his dog. And we could have even stood that without any too much complaint, but he stuck around old man Beebe's place for a couple of weeks—and then he up and married Flora!

Me, I don't care much for animal stories. I don't like the morals they point.

Snow-birds

by Maxwell Smith

Author of "Confession," "Burnt Money," etc.

IT WAS A CLEVER SCHEME THAT CAPELLA HAD WORKED OUT, MARVELOUSLY CLEVER! BUT THE SPECIAL AGENTS WAITED AND WATCHED. THEY KNEW A BREAK WOULD COME. . . . . .

THERE'S a line through here," said Special Agent Farley of the narcotic division of the department of internal revenue, looking sourly at his partner. "No doubt about it. They're getting dope through from Canada right under our noses. Here"—he referred to the message from headquarters that had brought him and Longworth back from the border to Albany—"they took a bird with eighteen ounces of coke on him down in New York three minutes after he'd talked with Capella. And Capella had just arrived from Albany."

"Why didn't they get Capella," grumbled Longworth. "If they saw the deal coming off——"

"They didn't. Two of the New York dope squad bumped into the peddler and made the pinch on spec. He wouldn't say where he got the stuff, but they learned he'd just left Capella. And"—with further exasperation—"then they discovered that Capella was only a couple of hours in from Albany and that he's been up here frequently in the last two months."

"If they'd been keeping tabs down there," grumbled Longworth, "they could have tipped us off that Capella was up State."

"And the chief thinks if we'd been on the job we'd have known Capella was here," returned Farley dryly. "Working on this end makes us the goats, Long."

"I suppose they think we've been sitting restful in a corner with a flock of the Canadian liquor that flows through here," said Longworth aggrievedly. "We've kept on the go, haven't we? How much time have we spent in Albany?"

Farley, older in the service and tougher of hide, used to being prodded when what appeared to be a regular avenue for the illicit importation of drugs was not quickly blocked, nodded seriously.

"That's just it, Long. How much time have we spent in Albany? Not enough, apparently. While we've been scouting nearer the border it looks like Capella and his crowd have been clearing the stuff on us here."

"Every lead we've got has taken us farther up State," argued Longworth. "Say, Dick, I'm going to get a transfer to the rum gang. When you're looking for truckloads of liquor you've got a chance—there's something you can see without using an X ray. But a runner can bring in enough dope in a watch case or behind his ears to make his trip worth while, and how're you going to get wise to him?"

Farley shook his head. There was no use arguing.

"We've got a fresh start, Long. We lay for Capella."

Capella was known to be on the inner circle of the New York City dope ring, but nothing ever had been got on him. He was one of the higher-ups who usually stand clear when arrests are made. The little men, the peddlers and runners, often hopheads themselves, get caught and do their little bits, but that means no more than the cutting off of a few tentacles of the octopus. The head and body of the traffic remain and new tentacles are quickly grown.

Capella was one of the most active among the higher-ups. As a sort of field general, scheming out smuggling routes and buying the dope, he came into actual contact with the stuff. Therefore he took chances not taken by some of his associates who shared in the immense profits. He took chances and got away with it because he seemingly was able to see two ways at once. On the several occasions on which the police had taken him he had been empty-handed. They couldn't tie him up. Even when a peddler, on promise of immunity, had implicated him, Capella had beaten the case. No one ever had tried that again. The man who squawked was shot dead twelve hours after finishing his time on the Island.

That was Capella, who, the special agents were now advised, appeared to be directing this new and troublesome underground passage from Canada.

The route which Farley and Longworth were trying to suppress had come into existence as a direct result of an intensive campaign to stop the smuggling of drugs at the Port of New York. The bulk of the dope—heroin, cocaine, morphine—brought illicitly into the United States comes from Europe. By close coöperation the Federal agents and the New York police had succeeded in cutting down this traffic to a minimum. Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of drugs had been seized on ships or in raids soon after being landed. The smugglers were disorganized, afraid to take the long chances now necessary to get the stuff ashore.

But as New York City must have its certain amount of food and fuel delivered regularly, so must New York City have its supply of contraband drugs. More so. A person can go for days without eating, for days endure cold. An addict cannot continue for days without his drug. It is not when he is coked up that he is most dangerous, but when he has the yen and lacks the dope to satisfy it. Then he'll do murder to fill his craving.

The authorities recognize that while endeavoring to stamp out the evil. Addicts who register with the city health department are allowed their daily dose. But it is acknowledged that only a small percentage of the addicts in the great city are registered. The vast majority, especially those of criminal tendencies, want neither to be recorded nor cured as the authorities attempt to cure those who come under attention. The average addict takes dope because he wants it; and he'll get it one way or another.

So for its legion of victims this most vicious traffic of all must have supplies.

With the tightening up on drug smuggling at New York, Capella and his kind were forced to turn elsewhere. This was a time for action on their part as well as that of the authorities. With the lid clamped down, prices could be doubled, trebled, on the plea that the demand exceeded the supply. The "dope" does not quibble over price. In a pinch a drunkard can go without a drink if he hasn't the price and can't beg his particular brand of poison. Unlike the drunkard, the drug addict never can beg his portion. There is no shred or charity or compassion in dope peddling. Cash is the only thing that can bring forth the happy dust. The addict gets the cash, whatever happens to be the tariff dictated by the traffickers; he gets the cash—somehow.

Thus these were big days for Capella and his ilk. There are four hundred and eighty grains in an ounce. An ounce of dope, diluted with borax or some other harmless salt, could be doled into decks which would bring from three hundred to five hundred dollars, dependent upon the class of trade being catered to. That was the return on an investment of from twenty to thirty dollars.

Capella had turned to Montreal because the smuggling of drugs was comparatively easy at the Canadian port. The real difficulty was in getting it across the border and down to the fluttering "snowbirds" in New York.

As Special Agent Longworth remarked to his partner Farley, the smuggling of dope is simple in comparison to rum running. Liquor is a bulky commodity. A small fortune in drugs, at contraband prices, can be carried in a man's pockets. Which might indicate that the bringing of dope across the line is easy. It is—the first time. Perhaps the second time; even a third. But the officers on the border have an unfortunate knack of remembering faces. If they see a man or woman traveling back and forth with any regularity, they become more than ordinarily inquisitive. And they have methods of checking up on what that person does at his or her destinations on both the American and Canadian sides. Then on the next trip something happens.

Given an unlimited number of runners, Capella would have had plain sailing and could have taken care of his trade bountifully. The number was limited, however. An out-and-out dope-fiend, an army of which would have jumped to his service, was useless. A man like that would be instantly spotted, held by the immigration officers for investigation of his desirability and made to prove his citizenship. If not on his first trip, he would be searched on his second. Those not branded as dopes who would undertake the job were not numerous. And—the fewer there were in the organization the less the risk and the greater the profit.

In this situation the generalship of Capella counted importantly. He was getting dope in and reaping a fat harvest while the field was ripe.

On a tip from New York Farley and Longworth connected with Capella five days later when he again visited Albany.

Two of the little weaknesses of his kind were immediately apparent in the dope baron. His clothing was just a shade flashy; he carried too great a sparkle of diamonds. He was sleek, stocky, bold of face, with sly, observant eye and full, sneery lips; eyes and lips which reflected the arrogance of his type when it is putting something over and is backed with guns. Capella had come up in the world—if the accumulation of money represents coming up. As a dope peddler in earlier days he had trampled on the wretches who had come cringing to him to buy peace for their shattered nerves. The habit of trampling had grown on him as he had become more powerful. Whoever could

not put him underfoot, went under his feet.

This trip was made by him to call two of his lieutenants to account. There had been a hitch in deliveries. The explanation had not been satisfactory. Like most crooks he put little stock in the honor-among-thieves gag. He never had seen it proved.

The two, whose swarthy complexions belied the Eddie Burke and Joe Young which they used as names, met him at a middle-class hotel on Pearl Street in Albany. They had charge of his relay station between the border and New York.

"The stuff ain't coming through," he said with frank insinuation. "Where is it?"

They looked at him resentfully; but didn't forget that he was their master.

"We ain't been getting it," said Burke surlily. His narrow-slitted eyes met Capella's, fell away, came back, fell again. "It ain't been coming through."

Capella's full lips screwed up around his cigar.

"Not to me," he said pointedly. "But it's been coming from across the line. I've checked up on that. I ain't been getting half what's shipped for the last week. Now"—he paused, eying them viciously—"where's it going? Who's getting it?"

Young hunched his broad shoulders, swung his long arms uncomfortably. A long scar shone livid from the end of his mouth to the outer corner of his left eye.

"Honest," he affirmed throatily, "we ain't gettin' nuttin'. We been shootin' all 'at shows up. I dunno but what—— Say!" he ended abruptly. "Y' suppose they're wise?"

"Wise!" jeered Capella. "That's what you guys better get—wise! See? You're getting more money outa me than you ever seen before. That's for tending to my racket—not for gyping me. Get me?"

"It ain't comin', I tell yuh," protested Young.

"Lemme tell you," interrupted Capella: "The stuff's shipped to you O. K. It don't reach me. If you don't get it, like you say," he sneered, "then it's up to you to find the leak and plug it up. That's all. Shut up. Get t'ell back on the job and show us something."

Muttering but obedient, they went. Capella was the boss. They were making money with him, good money. Should they run foul of him, they understood, their friends almost certainly would be called upon to contribute to funeral expenses.

Capella was getting away not only with his illegal drug traffic, but also with the reputation of being a bad man to cross. In a way he was all that. Then again he was not. The underworld is curiously childish in some things; one being that a man can get by on a rather legendary reputation without having actually done anything for years to sustain it except buy a shooting now and then. Money covers a lot down below as it does up above.

Special Agents Farley and Longworth were in the hotel lobby when Capella's lieutenants went to his room. When Young and Burke came down a half hour later, whispering guardedly but explosively in Italian over their chief's ultimatum, Farley took their trail.

"You stay to Capella unless he leaves for New York," he instructed Longworth. "If he does that, wire New York to meet him. They can give him a frisk—he may be carrying back a bundle—but tell them to let him get well away from the station before they come up with him and to say nothing about his having been in Albany. We'll play dead on this end as long as we can. Anyhow, have word of your whereabouts at our hotel at eight to-night. If

I'm not there, then I'll phone where I am. Right?"

"Right." Longworth grinned. "I've a hunch, Dick, that we're going farther up State again. Look out what these wops lead you into. So long."

Farley moved along the street after Young and Burke. Talking volubly they went on without looking backward. Half an hour later they and Farley were on a train heading north. An hour more and Capella was on the way to New York.

Having wired the New York police to meet him, Longworth sat down to await word from his partner. It came at seven o'clock.

"I'm at Plattsburg," related Farley. "The two wops have a place three miles up the lake. There's two others with them. And say, Long," he chuckled, "what d'you think they're running?"

"I'm a bad guesser," said Longworth. "Capella's gone home. What'd you find?"

"A chicken farm," laughed Farley. "About four acres on the lake shore. How does a chicken farm run by friends of Capella on the edge of Lake Champlain strike you, Long?"

Farley was in high humor. This was the best lead they had picked up.

Longworth caught the significance of it.

"It would strike me most that it wasn't a chicken farm," he said. "How many chickens have they got? Two?"

"There's chickens enough to make it look regular," replied Farley. "They actually raise them and ship to market. Uh-huh. And they ship some eggs, too, Long, get that. Not a great lot. About a crate a day—or half a crate"

Farley paused, to let his partner draw the conclusion.

"Well?" prompted Longworth. "Who gets the eggs?"

"The same man all the time. A grocer on Grand Street! I got that from the express company after a gabby neighbor to the wops had told me I might be able to make a deal with them on eggs. I buzzed him on where I could buy and he told me they shipped some. Come on up here, Long, and bring my grip. It looks like we've got a fast start."

"Let's hope," said Longworth less optimistically. "I'm sick of being panned. What are you figuring? That they bring the dope down the lake by boat?"

"Something like that. Reasonable, isn't it, with the top end of the lake sticking over into Canada and hundreds of motor boats and sail boats chasing up and down all day—and night."

"What kind of boat have they got?"

"Don't know—didn't get a chance to see. I only gave the place the once over, then started out to find out what I could about the men running it. They've been there since spring. Get the next train, Long, and we'll look them over right in the morning."

"Coming," said Longworth.

For three days the grocery store on Grand Street received no eggs from Plattsburg.

Capella tore his hair and telegraphed as vituperatively as the company would allow. When answering telegrams stated that eggs had been shipped, he bit his fingers and cursed Burke and Young all over again.

At the express office in Plattsburg Burke and Young also bit their fingers because that is a trick of their race when excited, and demanded that the shipments be located. These were special eggs for a special customer who in turn had to have them for special customers.

The express agent answered blandly that he understood. Soothingly, he promised to send tracers after the missing packages. He was sure they'd be found; although of course he agreed with the shippers that fresh eggs should not be sidetracked. He didn't mention

that they were sidetracked on authority of the United States Government as represented by Special Agents Farley and Longworth of the narcotic division, internal revenue department.

At the New York end the delicatessen keeper, urged by Capella, raged at the express company. He offered the same plea—special eggs for special customers. In return he got an interesting fiction about a general mix-up and delay to all express matter from up State and a promise that the three crates would be quickly recovered.

Meanwhile Farley and Longworth were camping alongside the chicken farm. The crates of eggs they had seized left no mistake about their having tapped the dope line. But they had still to discover where the dope originated.

The farm, they were satisfied, was only a halfway house. During their three days on the scene none but Burke and Young went from the ramshackle old house on the lake shore and they went only to rave at the express agent. No one had visited the place.

The Federal men were certain of that because with the assistance of four fellow officers, whom they had summoned, a twenty-four-hour watch had been maintained.

On one point the special agents were disappointed. They had banked on intercepting some of the drugs being smuggled down the lake from Canada. When three days passed without a boat putting in, without the chicken farmers putting out in their motor boat, the prospect didn't look so bright.

"We stepped too fast in cutting off the egg shipments so abruptly," said Farley ruefully. "Capella and his gang will be onto us in a couple more minutes. It looks phony when packages shipped to the same man on three consecutive days all get lost."

Longworth offered a suggestion: "Let's deliver the last box they sent."

"With the dope out?"

"With it in. Send the box as it is. Capella can be got when he hooks up with the delicatessen to get the dope."

"We might try it," agreed Farley slowly, "but that won't show us how the dope gets here. It can't be raised like chickens! It has to come from somewhere before it can be passed on to New York. If we go at Capella they'll simply close up shop here and leave us blind. We still won't know their wrinkle and they'll be able to work it again some other place."

"Down the lake, that's how it's done," declared Longworth confidently. "That explains why they didn't ship any eggs to-day. They haven't been up lake since we came and therefore haven't any dope to shoot along. I'd try letting a box go through to kid them along," he repeated. "We can have the express company report the others stolen."

"All right," nodded Farley. "It's a chance to get Capella anyhow. If they don't put it over in New York, we'll raid this joint and see what makes it run."

But while they were instructing the express company to release the crate of eggs, among which was packed fourteen ounces of heroin, Capella was nearing Plattsburg to have it out with the men he believed to be double crossing him. They might be able to get away with murder, but not with his dope.

With two gunmen as a bodyguard, Capella arrived in the afternoon. This was to be a show-down. But while he'd do the talking he counted on his guns to exercise the real persuasion. He disliked having to take them because it meant opening up this detail of his business to two more persons, but it had to be done. He wanted to see at first hand how the machinery in his underground passage had been broken down. He wanted to get Burke and Young

with the goods. To do that required support. He couldn't go into the house as one against four. The lake was too handy; and a rock could easily be tied to the feet of a corpse.

Farley and Longworth saw Capella enter and sent a hurry call for their fellow agents then off watch. Now was the time to raid.

His underlings received Capella sullenly. Their two companions stayed in the background; they were lesser lights, not long in the country and not thoroughly aware of anything except that they were being paid amazingly for looking after chickens and keeping their mouths shut.

Capella instantly broke out with a torrent of abuse. These were costly days for him. With an actual shortage of dope in the city, any price named could be had for it.

"It's the last chance for you," he finally snarled. "I told you the other day you couldn't gyp me. Then when you'd been holding out half the stuff you hold it all! Three days since I got anything from you—this is the fourth. What about it?"

Burke's eyes grew narrower. There was murder in them—and fear as he squinted at the gunmen. He knew them. Silently he handed Capella the express receipts for the missing crates.

Capella threw them on the floor.

"That's what I think of that! How much'd you give the express guy for tickets for boxes you didn't ship, eh? You got him to fall easy, didn't you, because it won't stand the company much to settle a claim for some eggs! That's how you worked it—and you've got the gall to flash the bunk tickets on me!"

He spoke in English as usual for that was one of his vanities, but Burke replied in Italian.

"Somebody who knows what's in them is taking the crates from the express. Nobody knows from us. It's at New York——"

"You were holding out before any crates got lost," erupted Capella.

Burke waved his arms, losing his temper.

"That was the fault of the birds, I tell you," he shouted. "They didn't all get here—not yesterday, not the day before, not for more than a week. I don't know where they went."

Capella reviled them furiously.

Young swung his long arms, his fingers restless.

Out of breath and momentarily out of words, Capella stamped up and down the filthy room which the four men had used both as living and sleeping quarters. The remains of their midday meal were on the dirty table. The straw pallets on which they slept were in an unsightly heap in a corner.

"The birds were too young, I guess," said Young. He did not wish to break with Capella, but his eyes were ugly. "You made us hurry too much. If——"

"You——" Capella ripped out the foulest, most atrocious epithet in his own tongue, more vile than anything that could be said in English. "You——" he said it again.

Young's face twisted so that the scar on his cheek stood out as a white slash then turned to blood as his face suffused with fury. Gibbering, he crouched a moment. His hand slid to his belt—came up with a knife.

Capella leaped back. The blade whizzed by within an inch of his stomach. His sleek face colorless, he flung himself behind his gunmen as they fired.

Mad with rage, Young plunged into the guns, smashed between them. But he was dead when with knife upraised he fell against Capella.

Cowed by the guns, Burke and the other two stood still.

Capella produced his gun and came to the front. His lips bulged fuller as he puffed. The knife had come too

close. He kicked Young's body and read the lesson, blustering to cover his fright.

"See what happened to him, don't you? That's what you're——"

Farley kicked the door.

"We've got you surrounded, Capella," he cried. "You can walk out one by one with hands up."

Farley ran back and took cover behind a bush opposite the door. His men were disposed around the house, reënforced by a policeman and a deputy sheriff he had picked up on the road.

The stunned silence in the room was broken by an oath from one of the gunmen. He turned on Capella.

"Whatcha got us into?" he demanded. "Who's the guy bustin' at the door?"

Shrinking out of range of the windows—though only by pressing his face close against the grimy panes could any one have seen through—Capella shook his head.

"'Sall right on that guy," rasped the other gunman, jerking his head at the motionless Burke, "he went at yuh with the knife. But what the hell's comin' off now? How'd the bulls get hep? What they want yuh for, Capella?"

Burke furnished the answer.

"The guys 'at got the birds!" he uttered with an oath. "The guys 'at's been grabbin' the shipments!"

"We're government men, Capella," came Farley's voice. "Are you coming out?"

Capella got a brace on himself.

"He's bluffing," chattered the dope baron. "He's trying to get us to walk out one by one and give up. There's another door. We can get to the water. There's a boat."

The gunmen snarled and cursed him. The chicken tenders, not knowing enough English to comprehend what was going on, jabbered at Burke for explanation.

While Capella argued with the gunmen to have them fight a way to the boat, Burke sidled toward the door.

Farley called again—sent a warning shot through the window.

There was a scurrying into corners as the bullet thudded into the far wall.

Amid the confusion, Burke took his chance. Quickly opening the door he slipped outside, shut it after him, and ran with hands upraised. He couldn't see fighting Capella's battle just then. He could see where he could help himself to a light sentence by coming clean.

"Straight ahead," Farley directed him from under cover. "Keep going with your hands up. In among the trees there and somebody'll take care of you. Is Capella coming."

"I dunno," said Young, then sought benefit by issuing a warning. "I guess he's gonna fight."

He went on as ordered with hands up, but he had no gun. He had dropped it on the floor as he got out. Among the trees he was taken prisoner and handcuffed with his arms around a sapling.

"Two minutes to make up your mind, Capella," called Farley.

The chicken tenders tried to follow Burke. They threw the door wide open, but in their haste bumped together and jammed there a moment.

Desperate, infuriated by the desertion of his forces, Capella shot at them. One dropped. The other wriggled out of sight and rolled under the house.

"Yuh damn fool! I ain't gonna shoot up no bulls for nothin'. Lay down!"

Capella was whirling on the speaker when a gun rapped him on the head and he lay down.

The man who had felled him took hold of Capella.

"Gimme a hand, Kick," he said. "This ain't our show. Le's throw'm out an' make a quiet li'l' sneak while they scramble for'm."

Kick bit off a chew of tobacco.

"Roll the bum," he said practically. "We'll need jack if we get by."

So they "rolled" Capella and heaved him outside.

"Le's go," said Kick. "The back door."

As they opened it they walked into the guns of Longworth and another agent. They tried to back into the house. Kick went down with a bullet in his head. His partner quit. A year or two in jail meant much less to him than the giving up of his life in a hopeless, another man's, cause.

Capella raised his hands to his aching head as he came to. Halfway he stopped the motion to stare at his wrists, wondering why they would not come apart. Sight of the handcuffs brought back his senses with a rush.

His eyes circled his captors, his fellow prisoners. He cursed them all with an extra portion for Burke.

"When you're through," said Farley, "we'll talk, if you want to, while we wait for a machine. You know we got the dope in the egg crates, don't you?"

The sleekness gone from his face, his lips flaccid, Capella mouthed.

"Burke has been telling us how you got the dope over the border," went on Farley. "Where'd you get the idea of using pigeons, Capella? It's new—real flying snowbirds! New—and safe enough after your men conned the men on the border that the lake was the best place to break the birds in as carriers because it gave them a broad trail to follow. Getting the dope to New York with the eggs was good, too. No chance of anybody being picked up with it on him."

Farley held out a slip of paper.

"Here's a message just arrived, Capella. Your pals up in Canada want you to rush up a bunch of pigeons. They've got a lot of dope—and no more birds. The last two came in a few minutes ago with these"—he exhibited two small cylinders filled with drugs. "One of them had the note, but that'll have to go unanswered. You haven't any use for the dope now.

"We were dumb," confessed Farley, "not to get onto the pigeons. We saw them around the place, but didn't figure them in. Burke tells me some of them got lost and that you went up in the air because you thought you were being gyped. If you'd taken your men's word, Capella, you wouldn't have shown us the way here. If you hadn't come charging in here to-day you'd be on the outside—if they hadn't nipped you in New York."

Capella said nothing—printable. Sweating, he squirmed.

"Better for you, Capella, if you hadn't been so suspicious." Farley's voice hardened. "There's three bodies in the next room. I understand that you shot Young. There isn't much doubt that you shot the other when he and his pal were deserting you. You should've believed the men you hired when they said the birds were getting lost. Then you wouldn't now be under a charge of murder, Capella—murder in the first degree."

Special Agents Farley and Longworth sat that evening in a hotel room in Plattsburg.

"I'd like to know," said Longworth for the tenth time, "where the missing birds went to. Do you suppose the gang in Canada was putting it over on Capella? Holding out on him?"

Farley smiled into his glass.

"Search me, Long. I don't care where they are. We've scrapped Capella's little snowbird line, so what's it matter?"

"That's so," said Longworth. "But all the same, I'd like to know."

They never did know that the pigeons had fallen and perished because Capella, with traffic thriving and prices high, had ordered that they be loaded to the limit of their strength—and they had been overloaded!

THE WAGON WHEEL

By William Patterson White

On his way to see Charlie Shale, the Indian agent, about a government beef contract, Sile Thompson, of the Slash F outfit, is killed by two mysterious rustlers. When he fails to return, his partner, Bill Derr, sets out to investigate. Derr knows that the Hawkins crowd, and also Jim Ferret, are bidding on the contract, and he knows that Shale is a crook. "Pap" Hawkins and his three unsavory sons—Sim, Hank, and Thorn—are a quartet of choice scoundrels. "Mom," Pap's wife, a big, coarse, but good-hearted woman, lives in terror of her husband and sons—but occasionally she gets mad and tackles moonshine. With them lives Dolly Warren, presumably Pap's niece, an attractive, decent girl, high-tempered. She likes and comforts Mom, but has no use for the rest of the family. There is a mystery about three names, Sue Mundy, George McKee, and Shacken. Pap, in a towering rage, has threatened to kill anybody who ever mentions those names, and he has forbidden Dolly to play on her fiddle a tune, "Packington's Pound." Evidently this has something to do with Pap's past. Shale makes love to Dolly—who breaks a bowl of flour over his head and chases him. Pap is furious at her. He wants her to be "nice" to Shale on account of the desired beef contract. Searching for Sile, Derr comes to the Hawkins place and meets Dolly—and sees Shale covered with flour. Shale says he hasn't seen Sile for weeks. Later Pap and his lovely sons visit Shale and make a proposition: They will force Dolly to marry him in return for all the beef contracts. Shale agrees. Meanwhile "Top" Sawyer, the sheriff, has found the dead body of Sile Thompson, and he comes to the Hawkins ranch, evidently suspicious of them. Bill Derr is there when the place is searched. Sile's saddle and bridle are found in the Hawkins stable. Sawyer tries to fasten the murder on the Hawkinses, but Bill Derr refuses to identify the saddle and bridle. The sheriff goes away baffled. Derr is beginning to have his own ideas about the crime—he is pretty sure that the Hawkinses did not do it—that the real murderer "planted" the saddle and bridle there. When he goes away, the conversation of the Hawkinses shows that they had nothing to do with the murder, and are equally puzzled. Dolly refuses to marry Shale. Drunk and enraged, Pap makes Sim and Hank tie her to a wagon wheel, and he beats her brutally with a whip. That night Dolly, in boy's clothes, runs away. Meanwhile Top Sawyer has ordered the Hawkinses and Bill Derr to come to his office. They do so. Tom Hicks, Derr's foreman, is unexpectedly present, by order of Sawyer, who melodramatically calls on Hicks to identify the disputed saddle and bridle as being those of Sile Thompson. Hicks flatly declares that they are *not* Sile's. Top rages—but his little show is a fizzle. Pap calmly says he is going across to Judge Dolan and ask him to make the sheriff give up the saddle—Pap claiming it to be his own property. Derr also goes to the judge—for his own reasons. Hicks walks out. The fuming and disgruntled sheriff follows—"to see who's boss around here!" In the courthouse they find Dolly sitting beside Judge Dolan. He and his wife have taken her into their house to protect her—Dolan shrewdly suspects that there is some property in her name somewhere, and that Pap has been making way with it. Dolan makes the incompetent sheriff give Pap his saddle, but he won't listen to Pap's pleas about Dolly. He orders Pap to leave the girl alone. Then Dolan takes Derr aside and in a friendly way tells him that the sheriff has been wanting to arrest him for the murder of Sile! It is nonsense, but there is enough seeming evidence to make things look bad for Derr. That evening, when Dolan and his wife are out, the sheriff calls on Dolly and tries to make love to her. He is such a fool that at first Dolly is only amused—but suddenly he boasts that he can arrest Bill Derr if he wants to. Dolly becomes frightened on Bill's account. She is upset, and while she tries to think of some way to placate the sheriff, in walks Charlie Shale, also bent on courting Dolly. Right on his heels follows Derr himself, who is keeping an eye on the other two men. Dolly loses her head and cries out to warn Derr, but the sheriff cuts short her cry and shoves her into the next room, slamming the door. The next moment a terrible cry comes from the girl. Hurling the other men aside, Derr smashes through the door, and, to his horror, finds Dolly lying on the floor, the handle of a bowie knife projecting from the bosom of her dress.

The Wagon Wheel

By William Patterson White

CHAPTER XVI.

I DIDN'T know there was anybody in here! I didn't know there was anybody in here!" babbled the sheriff.

Derr said nothing. He was kneeling beside the girl. His fingers gripped the handle of the bowie knife. He hesitated to pull out the blade. He knew he must.

"Get a lamp, you damn fools!" he muttered, and pulled strongly.

Wood squeaked sharply, and the knife came away in his hand. No rush of blood followed the withdrawal of the blade. Derr's eyes widened. He explored with nimble fingers.

"Ain't she dead?" asked the awe-stricken Shale.

"No," said Derr. "The knife went through her clothes into the floor. I don't think she's even scratched. Where's that light?"

The light arrived, borne by the sheriff.

"She was such a pretty girl," was the sheriff's maudlin remark, as he held the lamp where its rays would do the most good.

"She still is, you old idiot!" snapped Derr, and made a further examination that satisfied him that Dolly, save for a lump on the back of her head, was uninjured. "She's only fainted. Hold that lamp away, will you, while I pick her up?"

By the time Derr had laid Dolly gently on Mrs. Dolan's best counterpane, the judge's wife arrived amid a flood of questions.

She brought Dolly to in short order. The girl opened her eyes, gasped, and clung to Mrs. Dolan, uttering the most heartrending little moans.

"Who was it?" Derr asked gently.

Dolly raised her head from Mrs. Dolan's encircling arms. "I don't know," she whispered. "It was so dark! I couldn't see! The sheriff threw me right into his arms and slammed the door! Oh-h-h!"

Again she hid her face on the breast of the judge's wife. "My husband will see about this," said Mrs. Dolan, glaring like an enraged tigress at the sheriff. "I don't know what you've done, but you'll wish you hadn't, whatever it is. There, there, honey-lamb. It's all right. It's all right. Nobody's going to hurt you any more. You're safe with Jane

Dolan. You bet you are. Bill, ain't you man enough to take that disgrace to humanity outside and work him over?"

Derr tapped the disgrace to humanity on the shoulder. "Let's go," he suggested.

The sheriff obeyed the suggestion. He was as subdued as one could wish. "I didn't go to do it!" he burbled, when the bedroom door closed behind them. "Honest, I didn't. I wouldn't have had anything happen to her——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Derr, pausing in the sitting room. "But I don't know why she hollered to me to go back and why you shoved her into this room and shut the door on her. There's a heap of skulduggery here, and I'm going to find out what it is. Another thing, why did you pull your gun on me when I came in?"

To this the sheriff made no reply. Instead he looked about vaguely and muttered, "Where's Charlie Shale?"

"That's so," said Derr, wondering somewhat. "He's gone. First thing, sheriff, so long as you don't feel like answering any questions, let's find that knife. I laid it right there on the floor."

But the knife was not right there on the floor. Nor was it anywhere else in the room. Derr looked hard at the sheriff. "That knife might have told us something," said he. "Do you think Charlie Shale took it with him when he went?"

"I don't know."

"Another question you can't answer. You and I, Top, are going to have a busy afternoon when this business is over. I want regular answers to all those questions, sort of."

"Top" Sawyer looked at Derr. Top's aplomb was oozing back. After all, why not tuck away the facetious Mr. Derr at once. Of course, arrest without a warrant, except under certain circumstances, is illegal. The sheriff decided to stretch the circumstances.

"Put 'em up!" he commanded, reaching for his gun.

Derr laughed at the sheriff's surprised face when the man's snatching fingers discovered an empty holster. "I took your gun away, Top, in the other room. You were so flustered you didn't notice it, did you? Didn't even notice how light your holster was, either? Well, well, you are careless. You see, Toppy, when you pulled on me in the kitchen I made up my mind what you'd do once you'd do again, so I took the well-known steps. Yeah. Pass out quietly, Mr. Sawyer. Don't crowd."

"I'll get my deputies!" Mr. Sawyer exclaimed passionately, and ran through the kitchen into outer darkness.

"Well?"

"C'mon! Get a-going!"

"I can see it ain't well," muttered Sim as they got a-going, their horses' hoofs making little noise in the long grass.

Neither man said another word as they rode through the soft summer night. They rose a swell, looked over their shoulders, and saw for an instant the scattered lights that were Farewell, before dropping down into the darkness of the following hollow.

They kept their horses trotting—a good gait when one has miles to go—for several miles. Then, believing themselves sufficiently safe to warrant it, they slowed to a walk. Sim pulled out the makings.

"Put 'em away!" Pap, hearing the rustle of papers, snarled savagely. "You never know who's looking!"

"Aw——" began Sim.

"Put 'em away!"

Sim put 'em away. He knew when to obey his male parent. Yet he considered him overcautious. To be deprived of his smoke annoyed him. He snarled in his turn: "You're in such

a helluva good humor, I suppose you missed her."

Pap made instant denial. "I got her."

"I don't believe it."

"Tell you, I did. I ought to know. And I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for that fool of a Top Sawyer. I got in the house through a side window all right, but there I stuck because he was in the kitchen with Dolly. Sparkin' her, the old hunks. Well, I'd been roosting in the sitting room for fifteen minutes, getting a cramp in every leg and about ready to call it a day because Top he wasn't showing any signs of draggin' it, when Charlie Shale and Bill Derr came bulging into the kitchen. They hadn't more'n got in when the girl yelled at Bill to go back, and then Top Sawyer grabbed her round the waist and slung her right through the doorway and slammed the door."

"That's an odd number!"

"Ain't it. I'll bet Top was one surprised jigger when he got that door open. I had to laugh. Right in my arms. He couldn't have done it better if he'd meant to. I was so surprised I hardly had sense enough to lock the door and use the bowie. But I used it. Yop. Plumb center."

"You'll be sorry. Stopping a woman's clock that a way, unless you positive have to, is bad business. You'll see."

"What is this—a sermon?"

"Give it any name you like."

"I tell you, Sim, she knew too much."

"What more did she know that she didn't know a while back? A while back you said yourself her testimony wouldn't be worth a whoop because we could make her an accessory. What particular thing did she know?"

"Aw, it's no use explaining. You be satisfied."

"I ain't satisfied. Not for a minute. Remember, I warned you, Pap. You sure want Bill Derr on our trail!"

"I won't miss Bill Derr another time. I'd have taken a chance with my gun to-night and dropped the pair of them, only——"

"Only you knew you'd never get out of town alive if you did. You do have the glimmering of a brain now and then. Why not cultivate the glimmering?"

So, vilifying each other, they rode through the night.

"Almost home," said Pap. "We sure pulled out of it neat as pie."

"We ain't home yet," Sim pointed out darkly, more to wet-blanket Pap than because he believed they would not reach home without mishap.

Pap directed attention to the coming dawn. The sky above was dark blue, shot with great, spokelike bands of light shooting up from behind the eastern ridges. The night was fast departing, but there was still a soft blurring of color values. Objects at a little distance were not distinct. The grassy track they were following at a rocking lope—there was no longer necessity to save their horses—was a dull gray-brown with here and there patches of dead black where the earth showed through the coarse lush grass. Lush, for it was swampy ground, and the trail was bordered by thickets of alders, willows, white and red, out of whose low growths occasionally shot the straight, slender trunks of young tamaracks.

Dull gray was the color of the trail. And dull gray is the color of a well-used rope. Which was why neither of the riders saw the rope that had been laced three times across the trail at a height nicely calculated to throw a horse. Side by side the two ponies stuck their forefeet into the lacings of rope, and side by side they went down smash on their chins. It was Pap who catapulted over his horse's head and landed on his stomach with such force that the breath was knocked from his

body, but the essentially bad luck was Sim's. His flying form was halted by the bole of a tamarack tree, and he fell, a senseless heap of chaps, and spurs, on the blanket of last year's needles at the foot of the tree.

When Pap recovered his painful breath and squirmed into a sitting position he saw that both horses were tied to an alder, and that Charlie Shale was standing in the middle of the trail, coiling a rope.

Pap made a movement. Observing which the agent made remark to the effect that he had removed Pap's weapons while he, Pap, was struggling to regain his breath.

"I got his gun, too," amplified Shale, flicking a lean thumb in the direction of the unconscious Sim. "You can keep sitting still."

"What do you think you are?" demanded Pap.

"I am the fool killer," was the modest reply.

"You're a liar! You're the fool! I tell you, Charlie, this is the slickest day's work you ever did. I'll get you for this."

"Now don't be an idiot, Pap. Be very calm. Take it easy. Just make believe you haven't a minute to live, and act according. Pray, sing, or speak a piece. I'll be ready for you in a minute."

The agent backed into the alders. Pap started to rise.

"I am keeping my eye on you," said the familiar voice from the thicket. "Don't think I've left you, Pap. Don't think it for a minute. I have a horse here, that's all. I'm strapping my rope and tucking in my saddle bags all so nice and salubrious, your two guns, Pap, and Sim's artillery. Your rifles? Yes, I took them, too. They looked lonesome. Here we are again."

Charlie Shale pushed out through the alders and stood in the trail, regarding Pap and his youngest without rancor. "Don't look so peevish, Pap. I had to catch your attention in some way, and this throwing your horses seemed about as good as any. Safe, too. Gave me a chance to get your guns away without an argument. You're too handy with a gun, Pappy, old boy."

Pappy, old boy, began to call upon his Maker.

Shale nodded appreciatively. "You are a bad old man, Pap. You should have been licked oftener when you were young. 'Spare the rod——' You know the rest. I expect you're spoiled. Curdled is a better word. You'll never be sweet again—in this world. I have hopes for you in the next. Not that you'll ever be white as snow. Say a light tan. Yeah."

The agent squatted on his heels. From under his vest he produced a bowie knife, a knife at which Pap gazed with slightly dilated eyes. He began to sweat gently. Little drops of dew appeared on his forehead.

"Did you ever play mumble-the-peg?" asked the agent, tossing the bowie knife off the palm of his hand in the most approved style. "I never did with a bowie knife. But she stuck, all right. Now the left. Some ol' luck. Right fist. Left fist. Never missed it once off fingers of each hand beginning with the right pinky. It's an extra good bowie, Pap. I wonder if it would fit the empty sheath in your belt?"

Pap drew up his legs. He sensed the worst. Shale saw this, and chuckled sardonically.

"You've got a bad conscience, Pap," said he. "You act like you'd seen this knife before. Have you?"

Pap fairly outdid himself.

The agent nodded. "I guess likely. But not to-day, if I have any luck. Pap, I ought to down you. I'm failing in my duty when I don't. I admit it. I haven't got the heart. I never had. I'm too soft-natured for my own good. But nicking you, Pap, is something else

again. That won't lie heavy on my conscience. Have you any preference in shoulders?"

"Huh?"

"If you have a pet shoulder, lemme know, and I'll perforate the other. You see—— Oh, Sim is coming to life. How you feel, Simmy? Mustn't stand so close to the mule's heels next time."

Sim Hawkins sat up and groaned wretchedly. He put his hand to his head. The fingers came away red. He held them before his face and regarded them stupidly.

"Only the skin broken, Sim," Shale reassured him. "You ain't really hurt to speak of. I looked when I took your gun away. Yes, your six-shooter. Can you crawl, Sim? Then join papa. That's it. Never mind nuzzling each other. We all know how affectionate you are. I was just asking your pa to pick out the shoulder he didn't want plugged."

"Gimme a gun and I'll show you!" snarled Pap.

"I know you'd try, old man, but I haven't the time to fuss with you. If this was a story book, now, I'd be a real hell-bent noble and hand you both guns and fight it out with you. But this ain't a story book and I don't feel noble—not for a minute with you two jacks. Of course, it's right mean to take advantage of you this a way, but then it was right mean of you to use that knife last night. Yeah, I know. I may be doin' you an injustice in accusing you of swinging that knife, in which case what I'm going to do to you now is a greater injustice still. Sit easy now. Don't fidget. You make me nervous. Pap, you leave that girl alone."

"'Leave her alone,'" repeated Pap stupidly. "Then——"

"No, you didn't even scratch her hardly," the agent assured him. "Your eye was out. You were lucky. If you want to keep on being lucky, keep on leaving her strictly alone. This goes for you, Sim, and the rest of your tribe. If you don't leave her alone—if I ever get the notion that you're only thinking of not leaving her alone, I'll bust your mainspring. How will I bust your mainspring? I'll tell you. Do you recall that robbery of the Sandersville stage and the rustling of the Double Diamond A cows and the Cross-in-a-box horses?"

The jaws of both Pap and Sim clicked open in amazement. "But—but——" protested Pap, when his emotions would let him speak, "you were in those deals yourself!"

Charlie Shale nodded carelessly. "Quite right, I was. But not in the flesh. No, the man behind, Pap, that is yours truly—always. You can't prove a thing against me. Not a thing."

"We'll swear——"

"No doubt," interrupted the agent. "But what will it get you? Everybody knows me. My reputation so far as stage robbing and rustling goes is consistently good. While yours—my dear Pap, be reasonable!"

But this was the last thing Pap was able to be. He spoke at some length.

"Yes, yes, I know all that," acknowledged Shale. "But no jury will believe you. No; I'm safe, whatever happens. I've taken care of that, old boy. You remember in the stage robbery I only took my share of the money, and I let you and the boys have all the jewelry. Why do you suppose I let you have all the jewelry? Because jewelry can be traced, money can't. I made it my business to find out where you sold that jewelry, Pap. I guess they'd remember you—if the district attorney subpœnaed them. And the Double Diamond A cows and the Cross-in-a-box horses, too. Don't you suppose I know where you sold them? Sure I do. So you see, Mr. Hawkins, I have you on the hip. In regard to the young lady, you'd better do as I say. What do you think?"

But Pap's patience was utterly exhausted. He had, while the other talked, gathered his legs under him. And now he dove at him headlong, his fingers curving like hawk's talons.

But Shale proved himself the quicker man. He stepped in to meet Pap and swung his heavy six-shooter in a flashing arc. Pap, struck above the ear, plowed the grass with his nose.

"Here endeth the first lesson," said Shale calmly. "Simmy, you take my words to heart, and maybe you'll grow up to be a man yet. Incidentally, you'd better persuade your pa that there's something in what I've said. So long."

So saying he oozed into the alders and disappeared. Before the reeling-headed Sim had more than discovered his male parent was unconscious, the alders swished and crackled under the pelting rush of a horse. The sounds grew fainter, died away. Sim sat back on his heels and swore steadily.

It was in the Canton Restaurant that the sheriff found Bill Derr. Charlie Shale was with the sheriff.

"Look here, Bill——" began Top Sawyer.

Derr looked up as surprisedly as though he had not seen the sheriff enter.

"It's you, is it? You and him both. Sit down. What's on your mind?"

The sheriff hooked out a chair with his toe and seated himself with determination. Charlie Shale followed suit with equal determination. Oh, it was obvious that the Indian agent felt that he held a good hand. When the Chinese waiter came forward to take the order Shale drove him away with snarls.

The sheriff waited till the Chinaman went behind the kitchen partition, then he said sharply: "Where were you this morning, Bill?"

Derr leaned back in his chair, the rowels of his spurs kickering on the floor. "Where were you?"

"Nemmine where I was. I'm asking you."

"What's it to you?" demanded Derr, disposed to be insolent.

The sheriff controlled his anger with difficulty. "What are you trying to do?"

"One thing you can be sure of," said the bold Derr, "I ain't trying to make you mad."

Top Sawyer regarded Derr with hot eyes. He more than half suspected that Derr was lying. These uncertain citizens, reckless of consequences, are difficult folk for a sheriff imbued with love of office to meddle with.

The sheriff contrived to blanket his eyes and smooth out the wrinkles from his corrugated brow. He started to speak, but Derr got in his shot first. "Joking aside, Top, where did you go last night? I—uh—missed you."

"Missed me?"

"Uh-huh. You left in such a hurry last night you didn't give me a chance to say so long. Now, now, no call to get het, sheriff, no call to get het. I see you got another gun. Alla same, be calm. Be very calm. Take it easy. Suppose you hadn't a minute to live, would you act this a way? You would not. You'd pray or sing or speak a li'le piece or somethin'."

The sheriff stared at Derr with a puzzled eye.

"Yeah," rattled on Derr, watching the sheriff closely, "you are a bad old man, Top. You ought to have been licked oftener when you were young. I expect you're spoiled—say, curdled in the pan. You'll never be sweet again in this world. But I have hopes for you in the next. I—uh—I can't remember the rest of it. But I did pretty well far as I went. How about it, Charlie?"

Thus directly appealed to, Shale hadn't a word to say. He simply sat and stared fishily at Bill. His face had turned the peculiarly unhealthy hue of a noisome oyster. The sheriff saw it.

"What's the matter, Charlie? You sick?" he demanded.

"I—I don't feel well," stammered Charlie, fidgeting in his chair. "I must have eaten something for supper."

"You sure did—about three pounds of steak and a peck of fried potatoes. But that ain't what's ailing you. It's what Bill said. I know. Can't fool me. Let's have it."

Derr delightedly watched the situation develop. He almost laughed aloud to see the wriggling of Charlie Shale.

"C'mon," urged the sheriff. "What was Bill talking about?"

"I've got to get back to the agency," mumbled Shale, starting to rise.

Derr's long arm shot across the table. His hand clamped down on Shale's wrist. "No hurry," said he. "Stay a while."

A moment the eyes of the two men strained for mastery. Then those of the agent dropped. He sank down into his chair. Derr slowly slid away his hand. The sheriff looked on with astonishment, not unmixed with disgust.

"Whatell's the matter with you, Shale?" he demanded wrathily. "You're the boy that sicked me onto Derr from the start, and now——" he ceased speaking abruptly.

"Oh," murmured Derr, with all the gentleness of a cooing dove, "oh, what a long tail our cat has. Discovered. Our Charlie the nigger in the woodpile. Sheriff, I ask your pardon. I thought it was you had it in for me on your own account. I didn't know you were acting as Shale's hired man. Hope he pays you well. No, no, keep your hands *above* the table. Above. I thank you. Your suspicions are correct. The hard object pressing against your kneecap is the muzzle of my six-shooter. Don't let's have any demonstration in court. I said *don't,* Charlie! Sheriff, our mutual friend and I would be alone. We wish to converse in private. In other words, Topper, old settler, I'd be pleased to see you take a li'le walk with yourself."

The sheriff was prepared to fume a little. He did not quite know what to do. There was no precedent for this. He looked to Charlie Shale for orders.

The latter nodded jerkily and slid the tip of a clammy tongue along his dry lips. "I think you'd better go, Top."

"By Gawd, I agree with you!" snapped the sheriff. "It serves you right, Shale. I warned you something would happen if I tied into Bill Derr, but you would have it, and now look at the damn thing!"

The sheriff pushed back his chair and stamped out without a backward look.

Derr's smile was icy. It fairly congealed the soggy spirits of Charlie Shale. "Welcome to our city, Charlie," said Derr. "I give you credit. You surprised me. I didn't think you had the brains to cover your tracks like that. No, I didn't, honest and true. I never thought for a minute you were mixed up in that Sandersville stage holdup over in Morgan County or the rustling in this one. No, I did not. Charlie, when I heard you admit it, I was flabbergasted. You could have knocked me over with a feather. That is, you could if I hadn't been lying flat under a willow bush trying hard not to breathe so I wouldn't miss a word of your highly interesting remarks."

Derr nodded cheerfully. It was a pleasant thing to observe the change in the Indian agent. Hitherto tall, almost portly, of a good presence, his body now appeared shrunken, his countenance chopfallen. So hangdog did he look that any God-fearing jury would have convicted him at sight.

Derr's washed-out gray eyes never left the agent's face. "The hand is quicker than the eye," he murmued when, having rolled a cigarette one-handed, he reached into his vest pocket ostensibly for a match and produced a derringer. "Excuse my changing

guns," he went on, holstering the six-shooter he had been holding under the table, "but my arm was getting numb. This way I can hold the derringer in my hand next the sugar bowl and nobody will hardly notice it—except you. You want to bear it in mind right strong."

Shale slid the tip of his tongue along dry lips. "You heard me wrong," he said thickly.

"I wonder would the district attorney think so?"

Shale flinched—and surrendered. "How much do you want?"

"Not a cent," Derr declared virtuously. "I'm an honest man. Also, I'm a stranger in a strange land. I'm feeling my way. And the way is dark and dreary and full of chuck holes, and the moon has gone behind a cloud. But I suspect you of concealing a lantern on your person. A li'le light would be appreciated. You can trust me, Charlie. I'm your friend. Don't let anybody tell you different. Unbutton your large red mouth and tell brother what he wants to know, to wit: What have you got on the sheriff?"

"Nothing," averred Shale, the color beginning to seep back into his full cheeks. "You can't bluff me! You needn't think you can implicate——"

"Now, you take that word 'implicate,'" Derr cut in warmly. "It's a good word, a good long word. I always said so. I see you agree with me. But suppose the pitcher had not gone to the well, what then? Would Grant have taken Vicksburg? I'll bet he wouldn't. And that man," added Derr, pounding the table with his fist and an enthusiasm that made the crockery dance, "and that man was Abraham Lincoln!"

"Say——"

"Yes, I think so, but then again you never know. The world is wide, and we are none of us growing younger. Take thought, young man, take thought. Is it worth while? Is crime a paying proposition?" At this point Derr leaned across the table and prodded a lean forefinger at his vis-à-vis—mercifully it was so late in the evening that the restaurant held no one save themselves. "I see the gallows in your face, Charlie Shale, the gallows and the rope. Have you seen Thorn lately?"

Charlie Shale winced a little. "I left him in Marysville."

"I remember you were there at the time," said Derr with a grin. "What kind of a grudge did you have against Thorn, anyway? I'll bet he don't like you much more than the rest of the family do. But you haven't answered my question. What have you got on the sheriff? Anything that I can use?"

"Nun-nothing."

"Nun-nothing, huh? Well, I don't want to push you, Charlie. Far be it from me to pry into your family secrets. I expect it doesn't matter really. Just as soon let you work it for me. Tell the sheriff not to bother me any more about anything. You understand?"

But Shale had perked up considerably in the last few minutes. "You can't prove anything on me! Your unsupported word is no good. I can bring witnesses——"

"Now we're getting there," chuckled Derr. "My word won't be unsupported when—if, we'll say—I spring the joke. Tom Hicks was lying on the other side of that same willow bush."

A perfervid expression was wrung from Charlie Shale.

"So I guess I can prove it, all right," said Derr. "Made a mess of it, haven't you, Charlie?"

The expression of the wretched Charlie was sufficient answer.

"Hadn't you better call off that sheriff?" suggested Derr.

"If I do?"

"So long as the sheriff leaves me and

my business alone I can manage to forget what I heard under the willow bush. That goes for Tom Hicks, too."

"How do I——"

"In about one second you're going to make a fool of yourself by asking how you'll know I'll keep my word. You know because I tell you. Satisfactory?"

"Yes," replied the driven Charlie Shale.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE attack on Dolly Warren stirred Farewell to the dregs. The word "dregs" is used advisedly. Some said a former lover had tried to finish her. These were the women. Others, all married men, by the way, insisted that another woman had driven the knife. Still others, of the younger and livelier male element, who had been greatly impressed by Dolly's good looks, either saddled their horses and rode the range, or, with hats pulled mysteriously over their eyes, combed Farewell. It was noticeable that they did most of their combing in the neighborhood of the saloons. They pestered the sheriff, who, it must be said, was doing his futile best. He took his deputies and interviewed the Hawkins tribe.

But Pap was too much for him. The sheriff, harboring suspicions far from vague, was forced to ride homeward clewless.

"You can't hang a man on suspicion," he said to Nate Main.

"It has been done," grinned Nate. "But I don't think Pap done it, if you ask me."

"Who said Pap did it?" snapped the sheriff, mindful of the word uttered in haste. "And nobody's asking you!"

"That's so," Nate assented easily, and turned to wink at Hap Green. "I wonder how Pap got his head broke?"

"Fight among themselves, I guess," offered Hap Green. "They're always on the prod, that bunch."

"'Lo, Tom," said Bill Derr, nodding to Loudon, the son-in-law of Old Man Saltoun, and manager of the latter's ranch, the Bar S. "How's tricks?"

"Good hands," Loudon said. "You stand the years mighty well."

"Gettin' feeble," grinned Derr. "Can't eat like I used to. Liquor's the same. But shucks, what's the use of telling you. You know how it was ten or fifteen years ago when you were thirty-five yourself."

"You long, lying lump of calamity," said Loudon affectionately, for Derr was an old and tried comrade, "I'm younger than you this minute."

"This minute, huh? Not last minute, or next minute? Well—— How are you, Mis' Loudon, you're sure looking fine. And is that Junior? I wouldn't have believed it, he's so big. Except, of course, he takes after his maw in looks, I wouldn't have known him."

"That'll be about all," parried the greatly pleased Kate Loudon. "You stay to dinner and tell us all the news."

"You're a lucky jigger," said Derr seriously, when Kate was gone.

"Don't I know it," declared Loudon, swelling his chest, for he was tremendously proud of his handsome, black-haired wife. "I suppose you came out here to tell me that."

"Not exactly. I came for a look at that black horse, one of the bunch your punchers brought back from Marysville. You know—the black I mean belonged to that hoss thief they hung down there."

"I know. He's in my string. In the corral now. Ride over. The big corral, Bill."

The black was standing hip shot in the corner of the corral taking a drowse when Derr looked over the gate. The black was not Sile's horse. He resembled it in a way, but only in a way.

Derr returned to the Bar S office and discussed the waifs and strays of cat-

tleland's gossip with Tom Loudon. Junior, a sturdy, large-eyed child of ten, rambled in and climbed up on the table and swung his fat legs.

"If there was only something to go on." Thus Loudon, rolling a cigarette.

"There's always something to go on," said Derr. "All you have to do is find the something. I mean," he added hastily, "you can't destroy every bit of evidence in a murder. A murderer is bound to make mistakes. His first mistake is the murder. Having made that one, he'll make others. He can't help it."

"There's one piece of evidence gone in that black horse."

"I'd discounted that, Tom. I never really thought that horse was Sile's. It would have settled the murder too easy. And this murder ain't fixin' to be settled easy. There's a lot more behind it than we think for. Still, I had to be sure about the horse. It don't pay to overlook anything."

"Maybe the black horse will turn up the way the saddle and bridle did."

"Maybe; you can't tell."

"A black horse?" came in Kate's voice from the doorway. "You say Mr. Thompson rode a black horse when it happened?"

Derr looked up. He had not heard Mrs. Loudon's approach. "Yes," he said, "he rode a black horse."

"Well," said Mrs. Loudon, "well, I'd never have thought of it again if you hadn't mentioned a black horse, but it must have been just about the very day of the murder I was hunting Junior over on Wildcat. He'd taken Brown Jug and gone off on his high lonesome. He's always been begging to be allowed to ride up on Wildcat, so I figured that's where he went.

"I was about halfway up in one of those meadows when I happened to look down and see two men and three horses in a little clearing at the base of the hill. The two men looked to be packing a black horse."

"Packing a black horse," Derr repeated in a dry voice. "What colors were their horses?"

"Both bays with black points."

"Shucks! Commonest color in the territory. Let's hear the rest of it, ma'am."

"Yes, well, I'd been right around Wildcat then, and I hadn't found any track, so I thought I'd go down to the clearing and ask the men if they'd seen anything of Junior. I went down, but the men had gone by the time I got there."

"Good thing for you," Derr told her.

She shuddered. "I didn't follow. I didn't see any use in it. They had half an hour's start, and by the tracks in the high grass they were heading right away from the ranch."

"Then those two men were riding north toward the forks of the Reservation and Farewell roads?"

She nodded dolefully. "To think I never saw the connection before!"

Tom Loudon looked up at the ceiling. "Half an hour sooner—good Lord!"

"Lucky!" exclaimed Derr. "You were sure one lucky woman. I'll take it kindly if you won't mention having told me what you saw, or even telling what you saw to any one else. You haven't, have you? That's good. Then don't. I'm obliged to you for that information, ma'am."

"Will it help? Oh, will it?"

"I can tell better after I've looked over that clearing under Wildcat. I think I know the place—kind of a basin like, ain't it, with a li'le thin growth of trees along one edge? Yeah, I thought so."

"It's been a—a terrible thing," said Mrs. Loudon. "I hope you catch them. We all do. Men like that—— Junior, come here this instant and get your face and hands washed!"

Derr rode in among the trees fringing the edge of the basin under Wildcat and dismounted. He tied his horse and circled the basin on foot. Finding nothing, he began to cross and recross the basin, and as he went he searched practically every square inch of ground.

At the end of two long hours he had found nothing but an excruciating pain in his back, and not more than half of the basin had been searched. He straightened his aching back, produced the makings, and built a careful cigarette.

Before that cigarette was half smoked, Derr's body, bent forward and downward, stiffened like that of a pointer dog. There among the grass stems, its dulled yellow barred by the brown of a windblown twig, lay a gold watch—a gold watch from which snaked out a length of broken chain.

Derr put forth his hand and picked up the watch. No, he was not mistaken. It was Sile Thompson's watch.

"I always said it wasn't stolen," he muttered, his eyes sweeping the surface of the basin.

Slowly he began to crawl about combing the grass with his fingers. His expression was very hard, and his eyes were bright and shone with the alert ardor of the working bloodhound. He was hunting for something else. Nor was he disappointed. Within a radius of ten feet, centering on the spot where he had found the watch, he found his partner's pocketbook. He opened it, took out a wad of greenbacks, and counted them. None was missing. Sile's original roll was intact.

"He was killed just about here," he said to himself, his eyes on the ground.

His lifting gaze was arrested by two small, blackened sticks visible through a rift in the grass as it was shaken by a vagrant breeze. He slipped the money and watch into his trousers pocket and squattered across to the blackened sticks. The grass had partly overgrown the charred bits. Now he saw that it had completely overgrown other small charred bits. Scattered broadcast were more partly burned sticks. It was as though a purposeful boot had put out a fire by kicking it to pieces. Certainly there were in the immediate neighborhood a few deeply indented impressions of the high heels of one or more horsemen.

He made a cast to the left—to the right—back and to the right again, and found some twisted willow withes. Now, twisted willow withes and the remains of a small fire mean but one thing—the illicit use of a cinch ring.

Given the pocketbook, the watch, the withes, and the fire, Derr reconstructed the scene without difficulty. Sile Thompson had surprised a man or men at the branding fire and paid for the mischance with his life.

Derr sat up to ponder the matter. He felt something hard under the toe of his left boot. His searching fingers parted the grass blades and revealed a fire-blackened circlet sunk level with the surface of the ground. He did not remove the metal circlet from its bed. His brain was busy with the facts.

"I never stepped on this cinch ring," he told himself, "and if I had, the ground's too hard to sink it like that. It was done when the ground was soft." His brow puckered. "When did it rain last? The day the two deputies and I were over at that patch of rocks near the Farewell trail. That was the tenth. And it rained again on the sixth, four days before that. Of course, the ring might have been stepped on after the last rain, but I'm betting it wasn't. It was after the first rain. That day, likely. Because it wasn't a hard rain, and the next day was clear with a high south wind. Blow right through this hollow from end to end. Dry it out in no time. It was that day, all right."

On his hands and knees, Derr covered practically the entire surface of the

basin. He worked as the bloodhound works on a cold scent—slowly, with the utmost of care, many times retracing his movements.

It was noon before he was ready to leave the basin. His ground hunting had given him the following facts: Two men had ridden into the basin from the south. They had roped a cow and calf and built a small fire to heat a cinch ring. A third man had ridden into the basin, likewise from the south. Then the two men had shot the third. One man had kicked the fire to pieces. Both men, working from opposite sides, had tied the dead man across his own saddle. The saddle was on Sile Thompson's black horse. There could be no doubt of it, because Derr had found twenty-two clearly distinct prints of the identical horseshoe he had found in the smithy at the Hawkins ranch.

Later the men had mounted their horses—he discovered where two horses had stood for some time—and, leading the horse bearing the body, had ridden northward out of the basin. He did not follow that trail. He knew where they had gone. One thing he did not understand was the multiplicity of light boot tracks that had apparently been made two or three days after the rain. Light, because the ground had had a chance to dry out. This was sufficiently obvious, but why so many of them? What had the wearer of those boots been doing? Why had he circled and turned aside hither and yon, "up the middle and down again," for all the world like the drunkest sailor that ever staggered—or a man that had lost something. A man that had lost something! That was it!

The cinch ring! He had come back for the cinch ring. Unless it was the money and the watch. But Derr did not incline to the latter belief. It was the cinch ring.

Derr went out of the basin, leading his horse, at the southern side. He was back-tracking the two men. The trail led him to a wide shallow in a small creek where cattle came down to drink. Here in a maze of cow tracks he lost the trail. Nor, although he worked till twilight, could he pick it up. Too many cattle had passed that way.

He rode away in the dusk, his objective Farewell and a bed.

That mountain of flesh, Bill Lainey, his head thrown back and mouth open, was dozing in front of his hotel when Derr rode his horse to the edge of the sidewalk, reached over, and prodded him in the stomach with the butt of his quirt.

"Ka-hugh-h," remarked Lainey, and wheezed himself awake. "Supper's done, Bill," he added, blinking up at Derr, who sat full in the glare from a lamplit window.

"I wouldn't eat here on a bet," Derr assured him. "I've got a civilized stomach, I have, and I dassent take chances. But the li'le horse here ain't so particular. Corn, William, for the pony, and a night's lodging for the two of us."

"Alla same," chuckled Bill Lainey, who was an old friend of Derr's, "you'll be with us for breakfast."

"How come?" With suspicion.

"I got me a new hasher."

"Thank God! The last one would stop anybody's clock!"

"Yeah, well, this one is all wool and a yard wide, and the best-looking pattern ever looked through a collar."

"You're mixing dry goods and mules. Nobody I know, from the way you talk."

"Her name is Dolly Warren."

But if Lainey had expected to create a sensation he apparently failed. Derr was wearing his poker face at the moment.

"You are enterprising," he yawned. "How about that horse feed?"

Lainey brought his tilted chair down on four legs with a disgusted thump.

"I thought you'd be interested," he bumbled, heaving himself erect.

"I am. Why not? Bill, you're getting fatter by the minute. Anybody in Tom Hicks' room? No? Aw right, that's me, yours truly."

Derr noticed, on his way with Lainey to the corral, that some one was in the kitchen.

He unsaddled his horse in the corral, saw it fed, and returned with Lainey to the street front. The hotelkeeper collapsed thankfully into his chair and Derr departed, ostensibly to eat at the Canton. But, once past the lighted window of the Starlight Saloon and hidden in the darkness beyond, Derr turned abruptly to the right and slipped into the narrow rift separating the saloon from a private house.

Two minutes later he was at the kitchen door of Lainey's hotel. Standing in the shadow he looked in through the open doorway. Mrs. Lainey was not visible, but Dolly Warren was peeling potatoes against the morrow's meals. And as the peelings dropped into the pan on her knees she sang a cheerful song.

"Oh, have you seen my little girl? She doesn't wear a bonnet,
She's got a monstrous flip-flop hat with cherry ribbons on it,
She dresses in tuf-taffety, just like a flower garden,
A-blowin' and a-growin' and they call it Dolly Varden."

Derr stepped over the threshold and closed the kitchen door. "You ought to have better sense," he said severely. "After what's happened you must keep doors shut and the shades pulled after dark."

"It's hot," she told him calmly. "Might as well take a chance as roast to death. Besides, I don't think anything will happen soon again."

"You never can tell. Still staying at the judge's?"

She shook her head, but did not cease to peel potatoes. "I'm staying here on my job."

"You could have stayed with Mis' Dolan——" he began.

"I know," she cut in, "but I'm not much of a hand for taking favors when I can't return them." She gave him a quick look. "That sounds funny," she went on, "after the trouble I gave you yourself, but you know what I mean."

"You weren't any trouble," he told her, sliding down on a cracker box and propping his back against the wall. "How soon will you be ready to go to the Kanes?"

"I've decided not to go."

"Why not?"

"Here's a job. Here I am. I'll stay right here until—until I decide to leave."

"But—but who'll look after you?"

"I will."

"You?"

"Me."

"You oughtn't——"

"Don't you worry about me. I'm all right. I can look out for myself."

"You showed that to-night by leaving the door open."

"I hope—somebody—does come around," she said with a mirthless smile.

As she spoke she lifted the pan. Under it, on her lap, lay a six-shooter.

He eyed the six-shooter with frank distaste. "More and more you make it plain you need somebody to take care of you. You'd better change your mind about—about what I told you. I'd—I'd take care of you and I'd be good to you as I knew how, and I wouldn't bother you any. I know you don't love me. It's a business proposition, that's all. You needn't be afraid I'd ever take advantage."

"You're not that kind," she said in a low tone, her head bent over her work.

"And it would be a good thing for me," he pursued cunningly. "I'd have

somebody to look after the ranch house. Of course, you'd have your allowance, too, for yourself and the house. Shucks, girl, you'd be just like my housekeeper, only you'd have my name, and you'd be safer. Think of that. Nobody would touch you. You wouldn't need that gun in your lap down at the Slash F."

"I don't know that I want to be safe."

"You're foolish. Blamed foolish. You don't realize what you're up against here."

"Oh, don't I?"

"No, you don't, or you'd take me up."

She shook a decisive head, but the look her blue eyes flashed him was untranslatable. "You mean well, and I'm grateful, but I can't do it, Bill. If it wasn't that I've got other plans anyway, it would be impossible. Marrying you that—that way wouldn't be fair to you, or me either. Why, we'd be cheating ourselves of the greatest thing in the world."

"Huh?"

"Love. Love is the greatest thing in the world. We'd be cheating ourselves of that."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"That's the very reason why I want to be able to find out. If I'm married to you, I'm tied."

"Oh, that'll be all right," he said eagerly. "As soon as you find somebody you lo—like, you can get a divorce. See, just like that. Fix it too easy, and in the meantime you'll be safe."

Again she shook her head. "I don't believe in divorce. When I marry a man I intend to stick to that man. Bill, don't you see if you marry without love you're cheating yourself, but when you get a divorce you're cheating God."

"I never looked at it that way exactly," he said uncomfortably.

"And you can't cheat God and get away with it," she drove on unheeding. "I tell you, I'm superstitious about those five words in the marriage service, 'till death do you part.' They weren't included merely for the purpose of making the ceremony longer. They mean what they say."

"We-ell——"

"Let's not discuss it any further. I've told you. In town for long?"

"Have to go out again to-morrow," he made answer, accepting the apparently inevitable. "One thing, Dolly, Pap won't bother you for a while, anyway."

"Why won't he?"

"Head busted."

Her two hands became motionless, her expression bitterly disappointed. "Is he badly hurt?" she demanded, harshly abrupt.

"Not very," said he, regarding her curiously.

"That's good."

"How do you mean—that's good? I thought——"

"Never mind how I mean it," she parried. "Did you hit him?"

"Not I."

"Who did?"

"I'd rather not say just now."

"It doesn't matter," said she indifferently, and yawned behind a work-roughened palm. "Bill, I'm sleepy, and I've got to get up at five to-morrow morning."

Derr took the hint. "I'll be going. Lemme throw out the peelings for you."

Derr, having thrown out the peelings, returned the pan to Dolly, bade her good night, and withdrew as he had come—by the back way.

Dolly blew out the light in the kitchen and walked through the dark dining room on her way upstairs. Looking through an open side window she saw Derr pass into and out of a broad patch of light from one of the Starlight's windows. Instinctively but without curiosity she stood and watched him cross

the street. He seemed to be going toward the Happy Heart saloon.

"Has to have his nightcap," she said to herself, her lip curling slightly. She was no teetotaler, but she did not believe in making a practice of tilting one's elbow. She had seen too much of it. If her uncle and cousins had not been drunk on a certain occasion—she shuddered slightly.

But Derr did not turn into the Happy Heart. He passed it, and entered—of all places—the Blue Pigeon store. Joy Blythe, the girl to whom Derr had been engaged, was a partner in the Blue Pigeon.

Dolly's sniff was audible at thirty feet. Men were all alike! Rank deceivers, the lot! The words of his proposal barely out of his mouth, here was Derr calling on his old flame! Dolly did not stop to reflect that she had refused Derr in no uncertain terms, that he was an absolutely free agent. Not she. He had no business doing it. Oh, the flirt! And the other woman! What right had she to encourage him? The engagement was broken. Well then!

It was at this inopportune moment that the voice of the sheriff broke on her ears, and the sheriff himself started up from a chair close at hand.

"Well, Miss Dolly, I've been waiting for you some time," said he with the kittenish manner of a wallowing hippopotamus. "I thought Bill Derr would never go. I was beginning to be jealous," he added playfully.

She looked at him. In the darkness she could barely make out the gray oval of his face. "Sit in the dark and spy on me, will you?" she observed in a perfectly dispassionate tone of voice. "I'll teach you."

She swung a brisk right arm and roundly boxed his left ear. Grunting his displeasure, he reached for her. But she ducked under his arm, thrust a chair between his legs, and left him.

Bill Lainey, despite his overweight, could move with celerity on occasion. He entered the dining room, bearing the office lamp, just as the sheriff was picking himself up.

"Fell over a chair," explained the sheriff, and qualified the chair.

"I thought I heard some kind of a row," said Lainey, who had also heard Dolly's feet flying upstairs and had drawn the obvious inference. "Are you sure it was a chair you fell over?"

But the sheriff was in no mood to discuss historical facts. He went away, even, so great was his agitation, declining Lainey's kindly proffer of a drink.

" 'Lo, Joy," was Derr's greeting when he paused beside the counter behind which Miss Blythe was at work.

" 'Lo, Bill," said she, and gave him a sympathetic smile and a slim hand. "I'm sorry—about Sile. It's hard to know what to say. Words don't mean much."

"That's all right," he said awkwardly, and realized acutely that his words were awkward. "I know what you mean inside."

She nodded. "I suppose you're—on the trail."

He knew what she meant, and shook his head, for, as has been said, he did not believe in telling all he knew. "I don't know whether I am or not. It's a mighty cold trail, anyway. Can you keep a secret?"

"If you're not sure, don't tell me one," she made resentful answer—she had a quick temper, this Joy Blythe.

"It's a small thing," he explained, "even sounds foolish maybe. But there's no sense in beating round the bush with you. You're too sharp. Have you sold any cinch rings lately?"

"That's one thing we don't keep," she told him. "We always sell 'em the saddle or the cinch complete."

"Then who's bought cinches lately?"

"How lately?"

He gave her a date two weeks prior to the murder, and she flicked open the account book. "I'll look."

He took out pencil and paper and set down the names and dates as she gave them. "I don't see the connection," she said when she had given him the last entry, "but I hope it hangs the man that did it."

"I hope so, too."

She thrust both arms above her head and stretched luxuriously. After which she rested her elbows on the counter and clasped her hands under her chin. He raised his eyes from the folding of the piece of paper to find her regarding him with a speculative stare.

"That's a pretty girl down there at the hotel," she murmured with apparent irrelevance.

He did not pretend to misunderstand her. "Nothing to do with me," came his declaration pat and pithy.

"So," Joy said Dutchily, cocking a skeptical eyebrow.

This was too much. "You don't understand, Joy. That girl—why, that girl doesn't care the lick of a cow's tongue for me."

"I suppose that's why you brought her here from Marysville."

"That's not fair," he told her quietly.

"It isn't," she capitulated instantly. "I'm a cat. I didn't mean anything. But—but as long as you've started to lookout her game, you ought to keep it up."

"Huh?"

"The sheriff spent some time at the hotel to-day," said she. "To my knowledge he never did such a thing before. That slippery juniper, Charlie Shale, wasn't overlooking a bet, either. He was there—for a good while. Shale's a low-down dog, too," she added reflectively.

"Thanks," said Derr. "He is."

A customer coming in at the moment to buy condensed milk, Derr lifted his hat to Joy and departed.

He drifted over to the other store, run by one Calloway. Which store was also the post office.

"How's the demand for cinches?" Derr opened with apparent jocularity.

"Cinches!" cried Calloway, fixing Bill with a lackluster eye and chewing the butt of an unlighted cigar. "Cinches! I ain't sold a saddle in three months. Cinches!"

"I don't suppose you ever sell cinch rings by themselves."

"I do not. What do you take me for?"

"I ain't taking you a-tall, Cal," said Derr, who, having learned what he wanted to know, had no incentive to further pursue the conversation with the boresome Calloway. "No mail, I suppose?"

"Not even a post card, Bill. Are you staying here with us a spell?"

"Why?"

"I was just wondering if you weren't whether you'd be riding past the Hawkins ranch."

"Why again?"

"Letter for Pap. Special-delivery stamp on it. Special delivery! I guess they think Pap lives next door or something. But, anyway, the thing may be important, and I thought maybe I could give it to somebody who might be riding out that way instead of holding it till one of the outfit comes in. But—oh, I forgot. You had a run-in with Thorn, I heard. I guess you wouldn't want to stop there."

"Now what gave you that idea?" asked Derr, smiling his pleasantest. "You don't think they'd bother a li'le fellah like me, do you?"

Calloway looked at Derr. There was Derr's pleasant smile. But there was a look in Derr's eyes that didn't agree with the smile. Calloway was somewhat of a weak sister.

"Bother you?" said Calloway. "Sure not. I just thought——"

"Don't think," Derr advised him

kindly. "Might strain your brain. As it happens, Cal, I'm riding right past the Hawkins ranch to-morrow. Ain't that ridiculous? So you can give me the letter."

Calloway pawed around in the cracker box in which he kept the out-of-town mail, drew forth the Hawkins letter, and handed it to Derr. The latter, as he took it, glanced at the face of the envelope before he put it in his pocket.

"Here's luck," he said to himself, for the postmark was as plain to read as the W G R brand. He nodded to Calloway, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WHAT do you think's in it?"

"I don't know. Do you want to know?"

"It would be nice."

"Nice isn't the word. It's postmarked St. Louis. The heading in the corner of the envelope is that of Addicks & Blower, Attorneys at Law. It's about your property, I'll bet a horse."

"It's against the law to tamper with United States mail, isn't it?"

"What's the law between friends? Lots of acts are against the law, but they're done every day. By the best people, too. You'd be surprised. Say the word and I'll open it."

"Fly at it."

"Where's Mis' Lainey?"

"Gone down street."

"And the kettle boiling. Couldn't be more providential."

Within three minutes Derr had steamed open the envelope. The letter inclosed was short. It ran:

DEAR SIR: Your presence is necessary. The papers requiring your signature cannot be forwarded. We trust that you will come to us at your earliest convenience. Yours truly, ADDICKS & BLOWER,
PER A. C. A.

"I knew you had property," said Derr, tapping the paper with a lean forefinger.

They had been standing close together, reading the letter. She turned her head. Her face was very near. He thought irrelevantly that her skin was the clearest he had ever seen. She was losing her sunburn.

Suddenly she drew back. "You didn't hear a word I said."

He started guiltily. "Heard! Of course I heard!"

"What did I say?"

"Well—uh——"

"I thought so. Pay attention, can't you, instead of woolgathering all over the place? I said that maybe it's not about my property, if I have any, after all."

With such indecision Derr had no patience. "I tell you this letter is a piece of luck. If you turn it down you don't deserve to have any luck again as long as you live. What you've got to do is grab it quick!"

"You mean I must go to St. Louis? Why, how can I? I haven't a nickel, and won't have till Saturday night. How far do you think my wages will take me, anyhow?"

"I wasn't thinking about your wages. You're not going to St. Louis. I am."

"You?"

"Li'le me."

"But you're busy on——"

"I know," he cut in, "but that will have to wait. Your business can't wait."

"I haven't any money to pay you," she objected.

"Who's asking you to pay me? It won't cost much, anyway. Besides, I've been meaning to take a trip to St. Louis for a long time."

"You're lying faster than a horse can trot. You wouldn't think of going to St. Louis if it wasn't for this letter."

"Rats! What do you know about my business? Give me a letter to Addicks & Blower, so they'll know I'm all right."

"But suppose it all has nothing to do with me, wouldn't you look like a fool handing them a letter of introduction? Besides, I don't know the firm."

"That isn't necessary. Just give me a letter. I won't give it to them until I'm sure of what's what. You don't mind if I talk it over with Judge Dolan first, do you?"

"I wish you would. He's got sense."

"Meaning? Oh, never mind explaining. You'll only make it worse. You write that letter, while I fix this one up. I've got to deliver it to Pap today. Huh? Sure, I told Calloway last night I was riding that way and he gave it to me. Clever, huh?"

"Yes, but why and how are you going to fix that letter?"

"Because I don't want Pap to go to St. Louis, that's 'why.' And here's 'how' in words of one syllable. The letter is written with ordinary black ink. I'll get some black ink. In the first line look at the space between 'is' and 'necessary.' I'll tack an 'un' onto the nose of that 'necessary.' Then I'll drop a blot over the 'not' in 'cannot.' In the third sentence I'll drop another blot over 'come to,' and write in over the blot the word 'write.' These few changes will make the letter read: 'Your presence in unnecessary. The papers requiring your signature will be forwarded. We trust that you will write us at your earliest convenience.'"

"But won't Pap notice the blots?" she asked doubtfully.

"Of course he will. But what if he does? Blots in one of his own letters wouldn't bother Pap. Why should he think they'd bother Addicks?"

"I don't know Addicks & Blower," said Judge Dolan, "but I've heard of them. They've been in St. Louis since forty-eight. Conservative firm."

"Honest?"

"They're lawyers."

Derr laughed. "Good enough. I wish you knew 'em, though. It would help."

"You're set on going."

"Somebody's got to go," said Derr sharply. "This is a good chance to find out something for that girl. I know that letter concerns her business."

"How about what you're doing?"

"It will have to wait," Derr told him. "Every day's delay makes it harder to find that murderer."

"Don't you think I know it? But it can't be helped. Sile's gone. Miss Warren is alive. The living come first. I'll do what I can after her business is settled."

"Damn white of you, Bill," the judge said warmly. "I know what finding that murderer means to you."

"Just now it doesn't look as if I was very close to finding him, so I'm not giving up much."

Judge Dolan nodded. "Well, Bill, maybe I can help you. My wife's brother lives in St. Louis. Runs a grocery. Maybe he could help you to get acquainted with Addicks & Blower, or maybe he'd know some one who could. St. Louis ain't such a big place. I'll give you a letter."

"I'll bet they'll be pleased to see us," Tom Hicks offered with a grin.

"I'm counting on that," Derr said smilelessly.

He spent no time in considering whether his visit to the Hawkins ranch would culminate in a fight. His mind was busy with speculating on what he would learn in St. Louis. Was it all smoke? He had a hunch, but—— Oh, well, the thing was there to do. The girl had to be helped. No two ways about that.

At this juncture the two men rounded a bend in the trail and came upon Sim Hawkins. He was alone. He saw them at the same instant, and his upper lip lifted in a slight sneer. Sim, when

he did not see profit in doing so, rarely took the trouble to conceal his feelings.

"This will save us the trip," said Derr to Tom, adding to himself, for he had not made known Dolly's affairs to his foreman, "and give me a line on what's up."

" 'Lo, Simeon," said Derr, pulling up as they came abreast. "Calloway gave me a letter for Pap. Here it is."

"That's sure clever of you," said Sim, taking the letter and slipping it casually into his breast pocket. "If it was only the mail I had to go for I could go right back."

"A bright young man ought to be able to find some mischief in Farewell," Derr proffered carelessly.

"A bright young man will do his damnedest," declared Sim, and kicked up his horse.

"He needn't have said that about the mail," said Derr when there were four hundred yards of trail between themselves and Sim. "I'll bet you ten even, Tom, young Simeon will head for home the shortest way soon as he thinks he's out of sight."

"I ain't betting. I don't know what's up, but you know too much for my blood, Bill."

"Alla same we'll slide round the next hill and see. That long draw is bad going, but it's a short cut toward Hawkinses."

They slid round the next hill, and Derr was rewarded by the sight of Sim Hawkins going hellity-larrup over the bad going in the long draw.

"I guess Pap must have been expecting that letter," mused Derr. "Huh? Oh, just talking to myself, Tom. It don't mean a thing. When I begin to chatter like a squirrel and chew chunks out of whatever's handiest, then's the time to get nervous."

Derr, changing cars at Kansas City, had six hours to kill before the St. Louis train pulled out. He ate his breakfast as slowly as he could, but, try as he might, he was unable to consume more than an hour with the food.

Feeling somewhat stuffed after the meal, he left the station bent on a little exercise. The bawling of the cattle in the great stockyards fell pleasantly on his ear. He knew two or three of the buyers. As long as he was here he might as well have a talk with one of them and learn how prices were running.

Hence, accustomed, after the habit of the cattleman, to take his exercise on horseback rather than on foot, he hired a horse at the nearest livery stable and rode in among the cattle pens. At the end of two hours he had not met any of the buyers that he knew, nor had inquiry helped him.

By the purest chance he turned down an alley between two empty pens. Two riders, their horses standing still, were talking at the farther end. One of the riders was leaning forward and emphasizing his point by banging the palm of his hand on the saddle horn. The other rider was listening in silence. Oddly enough, the speaker spoke in such a low tone that Derr could not hear a word. Not that he wished to. But it was strange that one who talked so animatedly should do it in a whisper.

The speaker's back was toward Derr. But there was something familiar about that back, something that reminded him of Farewell. Derr rode on. The man who was not talking was looking down, so that his hat brim concealed most of his face. He must have heard the sound of the hoofs of Derr's horse, for suddenly he looked up and saw Derr. His lips moved.

Instantly the man who had been talking lifted his horse into a trot and disappeared around the corner of the nearest pen. The other man rode directly toward Derr. This man Derr now recognized as a buyer he had once met,

a most rascally person named Gull, of whom it was commonly reported that he had no bowels.

"Well, well, Mr. Derr!" cried Mr. Gull. "This is an unexpected pleasure. What good wind blows you here?"

"The same wind that blew your friend away," said Derr dryly, pulling up, for Gull's horse was blocking the way.

"Oh, him," Gull said, his little eyes fixed warily on Derr. "He's got business somewheres else, I guess."

"I guess he must have. He left mighty sudden, didn't he?"

"Looks so, looks so. Did you come in with a shipment?"

Derr shook his head. "Just looking around. See you later."

He crowded his horse past that of Gull, and rode on. He did not give Gull the satisfaction of seeing him turn the corner around which the other man had disappeared. It was too late now. The man had gotten away. The stockyards were large. Any one could lose himself in the alleys among the pens within sixty seconds. Anyhow, of what earthly use would it be for him to find out who the man was? It would merely satisfy his curiosity. And Lord knew he had more important things on his mind than the mere satisfaction of that.

The grocery belonging to Mrs. Dolan's brother turned out to be no corner affair. It was one of the largest in St. Louis. Mr. Sutter, the brother aforesaid, received Derr in his private office at the back of the store. He read the judge's letter, looked at Derr, and held out his hand.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Derr. Anything I can do for a friend of Lucy's I'll do with pleasure. And I think I can help you. I know Addicks. There isn't any Blower any more. He died last month. Addicks keeps the firm name, of course. Like to go around and see him now?"

Derr said he would like very much. Within ten minutes he was closeted with Mr. Addicks, and Mr. Sutter had returned to his grocery, after extracting a promise from Derr to return to the grocery when his business with the lawyer was finished.

Mr. Addicks, an elderly gentleman with sharp, green eyes under bushy eyebrows, a wide, humorless mouth, and a set of white whiskers of the style known as "Greeleys," steepled his long, white fingers and stared fixedly at his visitor. "And may I ask, Mr. Derr, how you obtained our name as the lawyers in charge of Miss Warren's property?"

"Oh," said Derr easily, delighted to find that his hunch had been correct, "a hint here and a hint there."

"Miss Warren knew nothing of this property—unless her uncle told her," said the lawyer sharply, the bushy eyebrows drawing together.

"Her uncle didn't tell her. Be sure of that. Take a look at this."

Derr handed him Dolly's letter. The lawyer read it with care. When he had finished he raised his green eyes to Derr's face. "She seems to place great faith in you," said he, "and none in her uncle. Is it possible that he really tried to kill her?"

"It's more than possible. Pap Hawkins would do anything to get what he wants."

"He would have a motive for killing her."

"Yes," said Derr in some surprise, thinking of "Packington's Pound." "You know what it is? That's queer."

"Not queer at all," the lawyer declared irascibly. "I have her father's will in my safe. If she dies or marries before she reaches the age of twenty-one, her property goes to her uncle and aunt."

"So that's it. I was thinking of another motive entirely."

"For instance?"

In reply Derr puckered up his lips and whistled "Packington's Pound."

The lawyer nodded. "That's 'Packington's Pound,' a very old song. I've heard my mother sing it when I was a child. Oddly enough, it was thirty years before I heard it again, and then it was at a hanging at Leavenworth fifteen years ago. One of the condemned whistled it on the scaffold."

Derr saw the rosy ray of a great light. "Who were hanged?"

"Two men named George McKee and Tom Shackensy. They had been members of Sue Mundy's gang of guerillas during the war, and they were hung for a peculiarly atrocious set of murders committed west of Tonganoxie on the road to Oskaloosa."

"Were there any others mixed up in these murders besides the ones you spoke of?"

"Two—Sue Mundy himself and another man. But they got away and were never caught, so far as I know."

"I think I know who the other man was—Dolly's uncle, Pap Hawkins."

"Why do you think so?"

Derr told him. Mr. Addicks combed his Greeleys with the fingers of both hands. "It does look suspicious—but suspicion is one thing and legal evidence is another."

"I may be able to get the legal evidence. Just let me have all you know about that murder on the Oskaloosa road."

"I'll tell you on the train. I'm going west with you to-night."

CHAPTER XIX.

"It's queer that Mr. Warren never told his daughter anything about his business," said Derr.

"Not queer in the least, when you knew Mr. Warren. He had his rules and lived up to them. One was, never tell a woman anything that you didn't have to."

"But with all that money didn't he live in some kind of style?"

"Not a bit of it. He lived as economically as possible."

"Stingy, huh?"

Mr. Addicks was not prepared to admit this of a former client. "He knew the value of a dollar," he replied stiffly.

"He should have told his daughter, anyway. Saved her a lot of trouble if he had."

"I may as well tell you that he never loved his daughter. He wanted a boy. It was an obsession with him. He never forgave Dolly for being a girl. When he came to me to draw his will he intended leaving everything to his sister and her husband. Then he changed his mind and gave his daughter a gambling chance by having the will read as I told you. Everything to go to his daughter unless she died or married before reaching the age of twenty-one. Said she was such a pretty girl he did not expect her to reach the age of twenty-one unmarried. And, in order to make it a true gambling chance, Dolly was neither to hear the will read nor to be told of its provisions until she is twenty-one unless—mark that 'unless'—she is in need of assistance. Mr. Warren did not specify the manner of the need. But he did not believe that, with the money being paid regularly to her uncle for her maintenance and support, she would ever require assistance. You see, although he could not foresee everything, he realized that circumstances alter cases. In his way, he meant to be fair."

"She is in need of assistance now, all right."

"If I didn't think so I would never have told you what I have. Miss Warren, Mr. Derr, appears to place the utmost confidence in you. In her letter she speaks of you highly, very highly."

"That's fine," said Derr, and made haste to change the subject. "But I

don't believe she ever saw any of that money you sent her uncle."

"She wouldn't. It's in the will that her uncle shall only expend the sums necessary for her maintenance. The remainder, after deducting his fees, he is to invest as he sees fit, for her future benefit, or his, as circumstances shall dictate."

"It's a wonder Mr. Warren didn't make you her guardian."

"Mr. Warren did not believe in putting all his eggs in one basket. Besides, he loved his sister and he had reason, or thought he had, to suppose that her husband was all that he should be."

"How come Hawkins didn't try to take the management of the property out of your hands?"

"He couldn't. The will is very plain on that point. All he has charge of is the expenditure of the money for Miss Warren's benefit, unless, as I say, she marries or dies before reaching the age of twenty-one."

The long, deep-toned whistle of the heavy passenger engine put a period to the conversation. Derr flattened his nose against the window pane. "The K. C. yards," he said. "We'll be in in a minute."

Pap and Sim were in the blacksmith shop repairing a trace chain when a shadow fell athwart the doorway. Sim looked up and into the barrel of a six-shooter in the hands of Mr. William Derr. Sim, being a well-trained young man, immediately reached for the ceiling.

"Why don't you pump?" Pap demanded wrathfully.

Then he, too, looked up. Immediately he reached for the ceiling. But he burst into speech with, "Whatell's this?"

"You'll see," Derr replied mysteriously. "I'll just collect your hardware. Then we'll step along to the house."

The hardware collected, they stepped along, Bill Derr maintaining his strategical position in the rear.

"You can put your hands down," said Derr. "Go right into the kitchen. No need to shove."

Pap, at the sight of Mr. Addicks facing him across the kitchen table, would have halted at the threshold, but Derr urged him on. "We're all friends here. Go right in."

Pap obeyed. "Where's Mom?" he demanded as Tom Hicks materialized in the sitting-room doorway.

"Right here," replied Mom herself, pushing past Hicks and plumping down in a chair beside Hank, who, gunless and scowling, nursed his bandaged hand and chewed tobacco cudwise.

"I suppose you let 'em hold you up, too," Pap sneered at Hank.

"I didn't have my gun on," defended Hank. "Anyway, I can't shoot left-handed."

"I don't see that you're a cripple, Mom. Why didn't you take a chance?"

"I ain't helping you no more," Mom answered briefly.

"I'll settle with you later," Pap assured her, after a stare of surprise.

"Sit down, Pap and Sim," invited Derr. "These two chairs against the wall are for you."

Pap remained standing. "What do you want here, Addicks?" he demanded.

"Mr. Addicks, to you," was the lawyer's imperturbable response. "Several things. Sit down."

"Might as well," said Derr. "Four of my boys are out at the corral. I can bring 'em in if I have to, only they'd hear all we have to say. You wouldn't like that."

"Why not?" snarled Pap.

"Because of a family named Jefferson who used to live on the Oskaloosa road west of Tonganoxie," said Derr.

But Pap was an unregenerate ruffian, and stiff in his own conceit. If his enemies had expected him to wilt they were disappointed. He snarled at them

as the bear at bay snarls at his persecutors. "What do you want?"

"I want all the money that has been paid over to you for Miss Warren's benefit," replied the lawyer.

Pap's laugh was raucous. "It's all spent."

Sim shot a quick look at his father. He was reasonably sure that the money was not spent. Naturally, he made no comment. But the lawyer's eyes were sharp. He had caught the look.

"I don't believe it has all been spent," said he. "Where is it?"

"Spent," persisted Pap. "If you don't believe me, try to find it."

The lawyer nodded. "I know where you cashed those checks. The Regan City bank people were very accommodating after I'd explained why I wished to know a few things. You always took the money with you, they said. I don't believe for a moment you spent it all. Return what you have left, make up the remainder in cattle, and we'll call it square."

"What do I get in return for being so accommodating?" sneered Pap.

"Life, instead of the rope. I'll defend you at the trial. I can manage it."

"What makes you think I'm mixed up in this Tonganoxie business?"

The lawyer passed a weary hand across his forehead. "We brought Mr. Tom Jefferson with us," he explained. "He nodded to me as soon as you came in that you were the man. That's Mr. Jefferson in the kitchen doorway."

Pap did not lose his composure for a moment. "He wasn't there when I came in," he said, rising and turning as if to see the better the man that now stood on the sill of the kitchen doorway.

"He was watching you through the crack of the door. I thought it would be better that way. Easier for him to recognize you and all that."

Pap Hawkins moved forward a step, peering. "Is that Mr. Jefferson?"

This was too much for Mr. Jefferson. "You damned murderer!" he roared, and leaped at Pap.

The latter, in the most natural manner in the world, dodged backward, then—sprang sidewise and dived headlong through an open window.

Every man in the room save Hank and Derr flung themselves toward that window. Hank did not move from his chair. Derr flipped out his gun, sped through the outer doorway, and darted round the house. He turned the second corner and opened up an excellent view of the back premises, but only Tom Hicks was visible, clambering over the window sill. He was shouting for the men at the corral.

There was no sign of Pap except the marks of his hands and boot toes in the soft ground under the window.

The woods were barely ten yards distant, and Derr was casting about to pick up the trail when there was a sudden, loud clatter of hoofs at the front of the house. Derr immediately experienced a sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach and retraced his steps as fast as he could run. He reached the front of the house in time to throw a shot in the general direction of a horse and rider disappearing in the timber beyond the spring. He knew that his lead had not reached the mark. He had had no time to steady himself for the shot. But he could pursue. Cursing the luck that had led Pap to take the lawyer's horse, an animal belonging to Judge Allison, of Marysville, which had consistently shown bottom and speed, Derr tossed up his reins and topped his mount on the run.

Pap and his racing horse were out of sight when Derr swished through the bushes surrounding the spring. Hunter and hunted fled through the trees like smoke through a railfence. But when Derr tore out into the comparatively open ground on the opposite side of the stand of timber, Pap had increased his lead to nearly two hundred yards.

"It's too bad you didn't get him," Dolly said with her lips, but not with her eyes.

"You don't act as if you mean it," Derr told her.

Her laugh was shrill and unnatural. "Of course I mean it. Why wouldn't I?"

He recalled her manner that evening in the hotel kitchen when he told her of the breaking of Pap's head. "I don't know," he said hesitatingly, "but——"

"You're foolish," she said with a low laugh, then changed the subject. "I'm not going to St. Louis with Mr. Addicks."

"Why not?"

"I like it here. Mrs. Dolan has very kindly offered to keep me for a while, and I don't mind staying now that I can pay my way."

"But this is no place for you!" he protested. "Not with Pap loose! You go to St. Louis."

"I'm safe enough," she declared shortly. "He won't come to Farewell again."

"There's no knowing what he'll do. You be sensible and go to St. Louis with Mr. Addicks. If you don't think I'm giving you good advice, ask him. He'll tell you the same."

"And more of it," she twinkled. "He's been at me already. But I'm not going for anybody. So you can all save your breath."

He gave up. It was no use arguing —not with Dolly Warren.

"Where did you lose Pap and which way was he going when you lost him?" she asked after a moment's silence.

He told her, and she regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Heading for the Rattlesnake Range, I guess."

Derr pondered this remark. For the Rattlesnake Range was no place for a man in Pap's situation. It was too open for one thing, and there were ranches scattered along it. No, Pap would certainly not go there. "What makes you think he went into the Rattlesnakes?" he inquired shrewdly.

"It looks that way, doesn't it? He was heading in that direction when you saw his tracks last. Where else would he go?"

Where indeed? "Somewhere near home, and I'll bet you have a healthy idea where," Derr said to himself, resolving to keep both eyes upon the engaging Dolly. Aloud he said, "I don't know, Dolly. I ain't sure. Hard to tell."

Keeping both eyes on the engaging Dolly was more than Derr could encompass, considerably more. Especially when the sheriff changed his mind about chasing Pap with a posse and incidentally drafted Derr. The sheriff's mental transition was effected by request of friends. For, be it known, members of posses are paid three dollars a day and expenses, and the above-mentioned friends were out of work at the moment. Manifestly it was up to the sheriff to take care of the faithful.

At the end of three weeks the posse had done nothing save ride their horses to whispers. They had not found Pap, and Derr told the sheriff they would not find Pap.

"You'll never find that fellah by hellin' and yellin' up and down the country bunched together like a travelin' circus," said Derr bluntly. "He can hear us for a mile and see us for twenty. Split the boys up into twos and go after Pap like he was a deer."

But this proposal, while not unacceptable to the sheriff, who, now that he was in the saddle, had developed a surprising zeal for the work in hand, was not precisely to the minds of the sheriff's friends. They preferred a posse. Safety in numbers, you know. There was a certain element of risk attached to the splitting-up proposition. For the wily Pap had undoubtedly obtained

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weapons by this time. Two men would run a fair chance of being filled full of holes. Besides, the posse, the component parts of which had already earned sixty-three dollars apiece, was getting bored. Sixty-three dollars is a lot of money. There were saloons in Farewell. The sheriff's friends made a suggestion.

"All right," said the sheriff. "I guess we've done enough for a while. I got business in town myself. Let's go."

Dolly Warren, looking out of the window of the judge's office early one afternoon, saw what she had been waiting weeks to see—Sim and Hank riding down Main Street.

She drew back from the window into the comparative darkness of the room so that she would run no risk of being seen. Her expression was almost joyful as she watched the boys dismount in front of the Happy Heart, tie their horses to the hitch rail, and enter the saloon.

"That'll hold them for an hour or two," she said to herself, and hurried to her room and changed into boots and a riding skirt. She pulled on her hat and went out the back way. To Mrs. Dolan, busy in the kitchen, she vouchsafed the information that she was going for a little ride. Mrs. Dolan, thinking no evil, watched her toss a rope across the back of one of the judge's horses in the corral, throw on a saddle, and ride down into a draw that gashed the ground fifty yards beyond the corral. For the sake of Mrs. Dolan's peace of mind, it was an excellent thing that she did not have an inkling of the direction taken by Dolly when she left the draw.

Dolly rode the draw till it cut a belt of timber. Then she took her horse by the head, scrambled him up the bank, and, screened from any chance Farewell eyes by the stand of timber, galloped straight for the trail to the Hawkins ranch.

Once on the trail she powdered along it with the devil on her horse's tail. A mile from the ranch she turned aside from the trail and rode the low ground into the timber behind the house. Here, a hundred yards from the house, she left her horse tied short with his head in a bran sack, and went forward on foot. She did not believe that Thorn had come home yet—if he had he would surely have ridden into town with his brothers—but she believed in taking every precaution possible.

On hands and knees she crawled up to a kitchen window and knelt under it, listening. She heard nothing but the loud and solemn ticking of the kitchen clock—tick-tock-tick-tock. This for a space of five minutes. Then, as she listened, she caught the slip-slop of Mom's slippers coming in at the doorway and crossing the floor. Crash! An armful of wood shot into the woodbox.

Dolly raised her head above the window sill and looked into the kitchen. Mom was apparently alone—a great, shapeless blob of a woman in a slattish Mother Hubbard standing in front of the stove. While Dolly gazed, Mom raised a work-scarred hand and drew it across her eyes. She snuffled.

"Mom!"

The woman whirled at the whisper. For such a mass of flesh she could move with celerity on occasion. She trundled to the window.

"Is anybody here, Mom?" Still the whisper.

"All alone. Come in, deary, come in." Feverishly she dragged Dolly over the sill into her arms.

"Oh, Dolly, Dolly!" she crooned, straining the girl to her broad-beamed bosom. "You dunno how I've missed you! You dunno! You dunno!" As suddenly as she had taken her to her breast she held her off at arm's length. Her eyes grew wide and frightened.

"You oughtn't to taken the chance! The boys may be back any minute! I don't know where they are!"

"I do," said Dolly. "I saw 'em. They're in the Happy Heart tanking up. That's why I came. Thorn back yet?"

"Not yet."

"I thought he wouldn't be. He was plugged pretty deep and hard. Sit down, Mom, sit down, and I'll make you a cup of coffee. You always used to like some about this time of day."

"It'll be like old times," said Mom, her faded eyes filling with the easy tears of the maudlinly sentimental. "How —how you been?"

"Fine. Boys treating you all right?"

It was then that constraint descended upon Mom—a constraint that Dolly sensed at once. Yet it was not because Mom boggled an answer. She didn't. She replied on the turn: "The boys know how to treat me all right. I guess they'd better."

Dolly made no further remark till the coffee was steaming in a pot on the table. Dolly seated herself back and to the side of Mom, whose back was to the window. It was an awkward position for the purposes of chat unless Mom turned the other way. Mom's chair legs scraped and the stretchers creaked. Mom turned. The light was full on her face.

"I thought so," said Dolly, making no move to pour for herself.

"What?" Mom asked, and smacked her lips over the fragrant liquid.

"I thought I saw it when I came in, but I wasn't sure. You turned around so quick. Yes, I mean your black eye. Oh, you needn't turn your face away, Mom. You did a good job with raw beef, but it's green around the edges still." Dolly's arm shot across the table. She grasped Mom by the wrist. "Who gave you that eye?"

The effect was more than she had intended, for Mom snatched her wrist away with a moan. Dolly was around the table in a flash. She seized Mom's reluctant fingers and pushed her sleeve up her arm. Mom's wrist and forearm were black and blue, scratched, and abraded.

"This was done lately—some time after that eye!" Dolly said accusingly. "That's none of the boys' work. That's Pap! Isn't it, Mom? Tell me. Tell Dolly. Isn't it?"

Mom stared at Dolly with wide, frightened eyes. "Yeh—yes," she said huskily. "He did it."

"I knew it," said Dolly triumphantly, feeling in her waist to make sure that the six-shooter was handy. "I knew he was coming here off and on. When does he come here—at night?"

"Yes."

Dolly's eagerness made her almost breathless. She shook from head to foot. She thrust her face close to that of her aunt. "When is he coming again?" she demanded harshly.

"He was here four days ago," replied Mom. "He said two weeks, anyhow. That'll make ten days, won't it? He won't be here for ten days."

"Ten days, huh. Then where——" began Dolly, but Mom clapped a hand over her mouth and cast a scared-rabbit glance out of the window.

"Don't talk about it!" begged Mom. "Don't! I—I guess you better go, Dolly."

The girl impatiently thrust away her aunt's hand. "I'm not going, Mom. Not until I get what I came for."

"What you came for? What you mean?"

"I mean I know you know where Pap is—where he hangs out daytimes. And I want you to tell me where that is."

"Wha—what you going to do?"

"What do you suppose I'm going to do? That man smashed my fiddle, killed my dog, beat me with a whip, and tried to murder me into the bargain! And you ask me what I'm going to do! What do you suppose I'm going to do?

I'm going to kill him! That's what I'm going to do!" Dolly seized Mom by the shoulders and shook her. "Tell me where he is!"

"I dassent! I dassent!" sobbed Mom.

Dolly flung from her in disgust. "So that's all it amounts to, your independence! I thought you'd broken away from Pap for good! Bill told me you said you were done with him right out in front of everybody, the day he ran away from Addicks and Jefferson! I might have known when it came to the scratch you wouldn't have any more backbone than a jellyfish! I might have known it! Oh, my God in heaven! I could cry!"

Mom began to weep with abandon. Dolly calmed herself and drew up a chair to reason with the old lady. "Look here, Mom," said she, pulling Mom's hands away from her tear-streaked face, "do you want to be a slave all your life? For that's all you are—a slave. You're treated worse than a dog. Pap comes back and wallops the stuffing out of you whenever he feels like it. And you let him do it, just like a doormat. Some day he'll give you what he gave me—beat you to death maybe. Then what? Then you'll wish you'd paid some attention to me. Tell me where Pap is, Mom. Your troubles will all be over then. There'll be nothing more to worry you, Mom, not a thing. Tell me where he is. What you afraid of? What can he do? Nothing, Mom, nothing. He's got you bluffed, that's all, and he's only a bob-tailed flush, at that. Brace up, Mom. Get a hold on yourself. Think! Think what it'll mean to be free of that man. Look here, Mom, is there anything you want to do, any place you want to go? I'll see you get there with a full pocketbook. Only tell me where Pap is."

"I'd like to go down to Arkansas to stay with Cousin Elvira," said Mom surprisingly. "She'd take me in. I'd—oh, I can't! I can't! He wouldn't let me!"

"Don't you understand, Mom? He'll be dead. He won't be able to help what you do. Tell me where he is, Mom. Tell me!"

"Oh, you can't do anything!" Mom cried despairingly. "You're a girl! What can a girl do? If you were a man now! But you ain't! And a woman can't do what a man can, never!"

Her eyes blazing, Dolly dragged the six-shooter out of her waist and slapped it down on the table in front of Mom. "God made man stronger than woman, but Mister Colt made her even Steven. Tell me where Pap is! Miss him? I couldn't miss him! I couldn't miss! Tell me where he is!"

Mom's reaction to the sight of the gun was instant. Her fit of weeping ceased in the middle of a sob. She eyed the weapon as the fascinated bird eyes the snake. Then she looked up at Dolly.

"You—you——" she began.

Dolly thought she knew what was passing in the other's mind. "It's my one chance," she told Mom. "When he had the boys with him, when he was living here, it was one against three—four with Thorn home. He was too strong for me. But now—now—— Where is he, Mom?"

"You can't! It's murder!"

"Killing's no murder for a mad dog! That's what he is! If I don't kill him he'll kill me! He's tried it once. He'll try it again."

Horror mixed with fear in Mom's eyes. "Tried to kill you!"

"Yes, tried to kill me! Didn't you hear me say so a while back?"

"No, I didn't. Wha—what made him try a play like that?"

"For giving him away about that song, of course—'Packington's Pound.' He tried to knife me there at Judge Dolan's, and left me for dead on the floor.

Didn't you hear him and the boys talking about it?"

"No, I didn't. Oh, Dolly! That tune! He will kill you now!"

"I know he will—unless you tell me where he is."

"Will you take somebody with you if I tell you? You won't go alone?"

Dolly, fully intending to shoot down a man from ambush, yet scorned to give Mom a lie in reply to her question. "I'm going alone. Tell me quick! Quick!"

By chance her fingers squeezed the flesh of Mom's bruised arm. "I'll tell," said Mom, wincing away. "God forgive me, I'll tell you! He's staying—staying at Lost Cabin in the—*Thorn!*"

Dolly whirled to face the doorway. There stood Thorn Hawkins, his face somewhat pale, but malevolent as ever.

"Didn't expect to see me so soon, did you?" he said, with a lift of his upper lip. "Where's your Bill Derr friend, Dolly?" he went on, locking the door and stepping deliberately toward her.

She snatched at her waist, then, recalling that she had put her gun on the table, she jumped to Mom's side and reached for it. But Mom, choosing that inopportune moment to rise, caught her huge thighs under the table and tilted it. The six-shooter slid along the wood. Dolly's clutching fingers grazed the butt.

Thorn, grasping the situation, leaped forward and kicked the gun under the dresser an instant after it struck the floor. Dolly who had started to run around the table, ducked under it just in time to escape Thorn.

Dolly flung an agonized glance over her shoulder. The kitchen door was shut and locked. She could not hope to open it without the key. And all the open windows were on Thorn's side of the kitchen.

Thorn rested both hands on the table. So did Dolly. Thorn began to edge around the table. She began to edge the other way. Suddenly Mom, who had been weeping hysterically and wringing her hands, flung her arms around her son's neck, shrieking: "Don't, don't! Let her alone, Thorn, for Gawd's sake!"

His struggles to wrench free gave Dolly an opportunity to jerk open the table drawer in search of a butcher knife. There was not one in the drawer. A wild shriek from Mom of, "Thorn! I'm your mo——" and the word cut in two by a blow from Thorn's fist that dropped Mom like a mauled ox.

Then Thorn swept the table to one side and sprang straight at Dolly. How she did it she never knew, but the chair was there and her hand touched the back. In a breath the chair was smashed to kindling and Thorn was scrabbling on the floor. Dolly, gripping a chair splat, staggered back against the wall. She thought she had knocked the man out. But Thorn was a tough mortal. The blood was running down his cheek from a scalp wound, but he hauled himself to his feet and went at her again.

Oh, then she knew she was done for. The chair splat was no fit weapon. And her revolver was under the dresser. Her despairing eyes, casting this way and that, glimpsed the family shotgun leaning against the wall behind the sitting-room door.

Thorn was quick, but she was quicker. She made one pantherlike leap, felt Thorn's hand on her shirt waist, felt the cloth rip, heard him crash against the wall, then—then her hands were on the shotgun's barrel. There was no time to see whether it was loaded.

She spun round on her toes, but she did not club the gun for a short-arm sweep. She had spent too many hours in the blacksmith shop to make such a mistake. She swung the shotgun from

her feet upward in an arc, precisely as the smith's helper swings the sledge. Even had she been given time to set herself and time her blow the result could not have been happier. Thorn, rushing her blindly, ran his head squarely into the terrific stroke—a stroke that beat him flat and snapped the gunstock short off.

Dolly leaned panting against the wall. She saw the room through a fog of red. Then slowly the fog cleared away like mist under the summer sun and everything in the room became visible with a distinctness that was startling. Mom's feet and ankles were projecting from behind the overset table. One slipper had fallen off. Her big toe was sticking through a hole in the gray stocking. Somehow that ragged hole seemed a symbol of Mom's whole life. She had always gotten the bare end of the bone.

There was Thorn lying on his stomach, his arms outspread. The right leg was drawn up in the position of one climbing. She could not see his face. His crushed-in hat covered his head. She did not wish to see his face. She had killed him. She knew that. The gunstock that had taken away his life lay beside his head.

What was it the Word said about the hands defiled with blood? She looked down at her hands, the hands that held the gun barrel. It was as though she expected them to have changed color—to have become red. They hadn't. Nor did she experience any particular sense of horror. She felt a good deal as she had when a horse jammed her against the corral fence—numb and breathless. Her mouth was dry, too. She could have done with a drink. There was Mom lying untended. She must go to her. But her legs refused to move.

Then suddenly, while she stood and panted and stared at what lay on the floor at her feet, a rillet of blood trickled from beneath Thorn's hat and drained thinly across the floor to a low spot beside a knot, where it gathered in a tiny pool.

Unaccountably a tremendous surge of relief suffused her being. Thorn still lived. A dead man does not bleed.

But the reaction was too great for her nerves.

Her young strength, which had been fighting to overcome the numbness in her body, now oozed from her as water oozes from a squeezed sponge. She was overwhelmed in a wave of languor. Without volition she slipped down the wall till she sat upon the floor. Oh, how good it was to rest! She was so tired—so tired. She would sit still a moment—only a moment. So sitting, nerveless, utterly relaxed, her head drooped, her chin fell forward on her breast, the fingers of weariness closed her heavy eyelids. She slept.

While she slept the sun was inclining toward his setting behind a mass of thunderclouds that filled the western sky.

Her slumber was deep. So deep that she did not hear the approach of two horsemen—two horsemen that rode up to the front door and dismounted. The hats of both horsemen were riding on the backs of their heads. Their dusty hair was plastered in points with sweat. One of them had lost his neckerchief. The knot of the other's bandanna was under his ear. Their eyes were wild. So was their manner. Undoubtedly they were thoroughly liquored.

"Visitor," said one, pointing to Thorn's horse.

"Tha's Thorn's cayuse," said the other, and produced a pint bottle from a saddle pocket and haggled out the cork with his teeth. "Li'le drink for brother," he said, and suited the action to the word.

"Here," he said, removing the bottle after a moment and handing it to his companion. "You take the rest. We don't want to give any to Mom."

The other drank and tossed the bottle over his head. Then both started toward the door. At the threshold they halted. The scene of havoc within stopped them like a blow in the face. But only for a moment. They saw the sleeping girl.

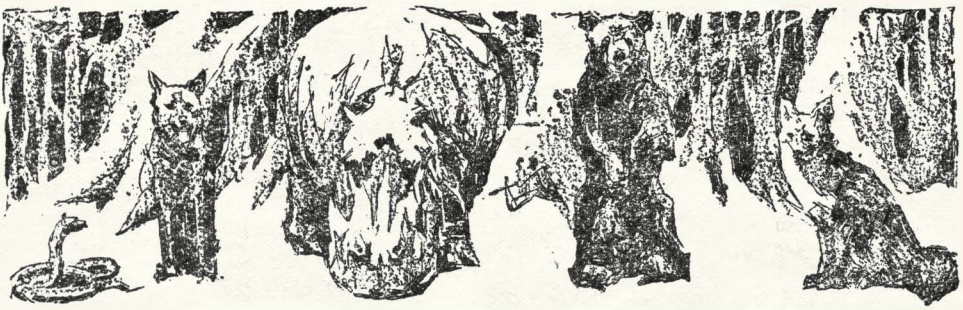
"Dolly!" whispered one with ghoulish delight. "Dolly! What a chance! Things sure are breakin' right!"

"We'll make her sweat!" chipped in his charming brother. "Teach her to squeal on Pap! Teach her!"

On tiptoe they stole through the door and across the room to where their cousin slept against the wall.

Dolly knew nothing of her peril until a harsh hand seized her wrist and wrenched her arm. She opened her startled eyes and gazed up into the whisky-flushed and hatred-swollen features of Sim and Hank Hawkins.

TO BE CONCLUDED.



Bedtime Stories for Grownups

by Russel M. Crouse

IV.—BLONDY'S NIGHT OUT

NATURE had endowed Mrs. O. Rangoutang with 208 wrinkles to the square inch at birth, but they were as nothing in number to those crevices, ridges and creases that worry had bequeathed her since the servant problem had reached the Big Woods.

Here she was again without a maid. Eloise Elephant had just walked out because the servant's room was so small she had to park her trunk in the backyard when she went to bed at night. Three weeks before she had had to dismiss Minnie Fish because she drank like one. Jennie Jackdaw, her successor, absconded after stealing everything but the family's good will. And now Mrs. O. Rangoutang was all broken out with desperation.

The telephone's jingle didn't cheer her for she had to answer it herself. She was almost too discouraged to smile even when she heard the voice say:

"Evening, Mrs. O. Rangoutang, this is the Anteater Employment Agency. Believe you're looking for a maid. Have just the thing. Girl wants a job and all she asks is one night out a year——"

The rest of the conversation doesn't make much difference. Seizing her husband by the scruff of the neck, Mrs. O. Rangoutang was on the way to the office of the Anteater Employment Agency. Amos Anteater, president, an animal of reputation and standing, produced a contract with the promise he had made orally as one of its stipulations.

O. Rangoutang signed it, pledging to this kitchen bonanza $12,000 a year, a Rolls-Royce and minor privileges.

Blondy Polarbear was a glutton for work, did all the scrubbing, washing, ironing, and sweeping with one hand and fried the daintiest pork chops that ever sizzled.

Came Thursday, Blondy's night out, and Mrs. O. Rangoutang lent her her $2,500 coal earrings as she set out for a bit of recreation. Came Friday, also, but came no Blondy. And on Saturday the fireworks blazed. Mr. and Mrs. O. Rangoutang confronted Amos Anteater, their contract in hand.

"You swindler," cried the agitated monk. "I'm going to sue you all over the place. This contract says Blondy Polarbear shall have only one night out a year. She's been gone two this week and isn't in sight yet, I'll——"

"Calm yourself and hasten not to the courts," said Amos, unperturbed. "She'll come back when she's due. Where she comes from a night lasts six months."

The Jesters

by Howard Ellis Davis

Author of "In the Shadows," etc.

IT WAS AN OLD AND WRETCHED JEST THAT SANK HEWETT PLAYED ON DAVE RENFROE. DAVE WAS SMALL AND PEACEABLE, BUT HIS CRONIES UNDERSTOOD AND LIKED HIM, AND STOOD UP FOR HIM. . . . . .

SINCE he had reached man's estate, Dave Renfroe had come in the evenings to Will Tacon's store at the fork where Hadley's Ferry Road joined the main highway to the city, forming the hub about which had grown the little settlement of Eldersville. And until, through no fault of his own that he could see, that thing had come into his life which had wrecked his happiness, these visits had constituted for him his one greatest pleasure.

For years the men of Eldersville had gathered at Will's store in the evenings, the occasion being to meet the "cannon ball." The application of the term was a misnomer, however, as the train never stopped at the little station, but belched through in a swirling cloud of dust at top speed. But always from the train there was tossed a mail sack—sometimes two when the second-class mail was heavy—which Sam Towne, Will's shock-haired clerk, brought into the store, followed in from the porch by the assembled men, who returned to their seats on box and counter and picked up the threads of their interrupted discussion or gossip until Will had finished "putting up" the mail into the lettered pigeonholes in front of his desk.

The women were likely to grumble when, upon those occasions when the train was late, their men each came straggling home perhaps an hour later than usual; yet, through these gatherings, the news of the surrounding countryside was disseminated—whose corn was not thriving and likely to fail; about the new family who had moved onto the old Seldon place; who was going to wait on Bithy Wellis when her next child came—and it was looked upon as a matter of course that each little home be represented.

During his labors about the farm throughout the day, Dave always had looked forward with a keen pleasure to his evening jaunt to the store, as a kind of reward for labor well done. And when, arrived there, he had hitched out Will's cane-bottom chair from behind

the desk—displaying thus a sort of proprietary familiarity of which he was not a little proud—and, tilted back against the counter, he cut from his plug a generous portion and filled his cheek and felt about him the good fellowship of his neighbors, he enjoyed a sense of satisfactory repletion.

Because of this thing which had come into his life during the past months, growing upon him gradually like some hidden disease until he was its helpless victim, he had come to look upon these visits with dread. Formerly a plump little man, the band of his trousers tight about his protruding little stomach, he had grown gaunt, so that his clothing hung upon him. His face, with its heavy sandy mustache, was lined and haggard; and among his uncompromisingly light hair Fanny, his wife, recently had discovered a few white strands. Perhaps Fanny knew of his trouble, for, in its early stages, he had spoken to her about it. With his growing shame, however, he had ceased to speak of it, and it was a thing buried between them. But she mothered him with a more tender affection, brewed for him bitter herbs to help his appetite, and never let an opportunity pass to boast to a neighbor about some attribute possessed by her man. She encouraged his continued visits to the store in the evenings; but it was only because of a certain stubborn determination in the man that he could bring himself to persist.

Dave always had carried himself with that unconscious dignity which is the bearing of many men of small statue; but of late there was a certain furtiveness about his movements, something deprecatory about his speech and manner, and when, upon this late autumn evening, he came into Will's store and made his time-worn remark: "Will, the cannon ball brings mail and customers, don't it?" He knew that his voice sounded flat and weak, and, his sensibilities sharpened to brier edge by his trouble, he took note that, instead of his usual genial reply, Will only murmured something unintelligible.

The mail already had come in, and, waiting for its distribution, most of the usual crowd was there: The Brown brothers from over on the ridge, John Helverson, Pete Boleman, Cal Redd, and others. Astride of a box, whittling its edge, sat Jim Potter, the deputy sheriff, the badge of his office—of which he was very proud, but which seldom was brought into requisition—pinned to a lower corner of his open vest. At the counter, purchasing from Sam, the clerk, a pair of black-cotton stockings for his wife, stood Jacob Horn, an elderly, bearded man whom everybody respected, but whom few had grown to know intimately. Big Hal Jones was seated upon the counter beside the piled-up bolts of gingham, the little sand-filled box on the floor directly beneath his feet.

Dave brought out the chair as usual and tilted himself against the counter close to where Hal was sitting. As usual he filled his cheek with tobacco. Then he looked up at Hal and remarked:

"My taters are goin' to turn out plum fine."

Again he was conscious of that flat, colorless tone in his voice, a quality which, of late, he had found it impossible to keep out. Hal smiled and replied: "That so?"

Dave thought he correctly interpreted the meaning of that smile and; flushing to the roots of his light hair, he grew silent, and remained silent, listening to the talk of the other men.

Suddenly a deep voice boomed from the doorway: "Well, folks, how's tricks?" and Dave looked up and saw Sank Hewett, bushy-haired, swart, a confident smile about his clean-shaven, rather full lips, his big body outlined against the darkness beyond.

But it needed not the sight of Sank to have its effect upon Dave. At the sound of the voice he had paled; a visible trembling seized him; there was a feeling of nausea about the pit of his stomach. With downcast eyes he sat in expectancy.

Nor was he kept long waiting. Striding in with his usual air of confidence, Sank stood for a moment in front of Dave, looking down at him.

"Hello there, cotton-top," he said then. "Ain't you got no manners? Git up and give yo' betters a chair." And with that he placed his big hand upon the back of Dave's chair and gave it a twist, so that Dave was spilled out, landing several feet away upon his hands and knees.

Sam, the shock-haired clerk, laughed aloud. Big Hal Jones remarked, grinning: "Come here, Dave and I'll pick you up." They all smiled at him, all except Jacob Horn, who turned from the counter and gazed at Dave as if it were incomprehensible to him that one could suffer such an indignity without retaliation.

And Dave grinned. Yes, in spite of the constriction at his heart that seemed like to kill him, and a buzzing in his ears, and a certain dimness of vision, he grinned. Rising from the floor, brushing his knees, he turned his colorless, grinning face about the circle and managed to say in his flat voice: "Just as you say, Sank."

Now there was not one among those men gathered there who, if Dave had flailed his tormentor across his ugly mouth and attacked him with all the strength at his command, would not have taken Dave's part. And had Sank fought him, there were two or three—big Hal Jones for one—who would have been quick to sweep Dave aside and measure his own strength against the man in Dave's stead. For they had grown up with Dave and loved him and were ready to side with him, as we are always ready to take the part of one we have known for a long time against a stranger. And Sank Hewett was a comparative stranger, having bought and come to live on the old Sim's place next to Dave's within the year.

But Dave did not know they would have sided with him. He saw only their indifferent willingness to laugh at a joke at the expense of any one, than which there is often nothing more cruel. Besides, it was entirely foreign to the little man's nature to fight back. Even as a boy, that he could remember, he had never fought, but always had been one to forbear patiently and make the best of things. And being a just man himself, and upright in his dealings with his neighbors, he seldom had been imposed upon.

Had these men been asked about the affair between Dave and Hewett, any one of them, reflecting the opinion of the others, perhaps would have replied somewhat in this nature: "Oh, Sank's the devil at teasing Dave; and Dave don't mind. He always takes it good-natured." They did not know of the quivering sensitiveness that lay beneath the little man's quiet exterior; they did not realize, as Dave did, that, since Sank had found he could use his unresisting neighbor as a butt for his teasing and his rough jokes, it had furnished him material with which to establish himself as an amusing figure among them. And of course they did not know how Dave, despising Sank, yet had sought desperately to establish some common interest between them, so that he would be treated like other men; and that Sank, despising Dave, treated him, in private, with the utmost contempt.

So the little man, true to the philosophy that always had been his, tried to keep a smiling face before his neighbors, knowing that, unconsciously to themselves, he was losing caste among those who loved and respected him.

He turned now to Sam, who had finished waiting upon Jacob:

"Give me a dime's worth of sugar, Sam. Reckon I better be gettin' along." And with the small parcel beneath his arm, he went out, forcing himself to turn in the doorway and, with a show of cheerfulness, wave his hand and call: "Good night, fellers."

Once outside in the darkness, smarting tears came into his eyes, and with bowed head he stumbled along over the rough road homeward.

Then a strange new emotion began to take possession of Dave. Held in its grip, he stumbled and tacked from side to side of the road like a drunken man. His breath came jerkily; broken phrases escaped from between his lips. When, at last, he unconsciously paused to collect himself, he found that he held his big bone-handled knife open in his hand, his thumb testing its keen edge.

Still held by this new emotion, he spoke fiercely into the darkness:

"I wisht—I wisht I'd cut his heart out when he turned me out of that chair."

Then, appalled at the words sounding in his ears, he hastily put up his knife and hurried on, not realizing that at last even such an humble little worm of humanity as he was beginning to turn.

Fanny took the package of sugar from him and asked for the paper, and it was the first time he remembered that he had forgotten to call for his mail. Her troubled eyes searched his face when he stammered an explanation; but he turned hastily away and went out of the kitchen, onto the back porch.

In his present state of mind, Dave realized that the only person he wished to talk to was Aunt Hannan. Old, withered, toothless, Fanny's great-aunt, she had come to live with them two years ago. When she had refused to come into the house with him and Fanny, Dave had built her a room in the yard, and here she lived her life. Drawing her supplies of food from Dave's storeroom, she choose to cook them for herself in her room over the fireplace. A silent old woman, for the most part, her tongue had a cutting edge that could flay one like the lash of a whip. Dave was more or less afraid of her; but he was kind to her. Only recently, he had spent several hours out of a busy day burning with a hot wire through the joints of a reed, in order to fashion exactly to her liking the long stem for her clay pipe.

When, after a tap on her door, he now shoved it open and entered her room, he found her seated upon a box, humped over a small fire, which was the only illumination. Looking curiously around at him, she said nothing, but turned again and went placidly on smoking her pipe.

When, however, finding it hard to begin, Dave nervously paced the floor behind her, she turned snappishly upon him:

"My lan', Dave Renfroe, what ails you? Come an' set down, or git out of here."

He came and dropped into the low chair at the hearth.

"It's that Sank Hewett," he blurted. "I ain't goin' to stand it no more."

When Aunt Hannah did not reply, but puffed on at her pipe, he continued:

"He's deviled and deviled at me, makin' fun of me befo' folks and holdin' me up as a monkey-ape till I'm ashamed to look anybody in the face."

"Fanny's told me," the old woman replied laconically.

"And he's a low-down varment!" Dave declared. "He treats his critters mean. I've seen him jerk his hosses till the foam drippin' from their bits was red. I seen him, when he was plowin' new-ground and the plow hung on a root and the hoss jerked and broke a trace take the critter out and kick it in

the belly with them big feet of hisn until it sickened and had to go lay down."

Sweet it was to Dave to pour out this vial of vituperation about his enemy, and he added:

"He's a coward, and a bully, and a sneak. I'm his nearest neighbor, one fence dividin' my place from his place, and yet he treats me, in another way, as mean as he does his critters. In spite of which I've tried to be peaceable with the man. I hates him worse'n a pizen snake, but I've tried to get on a friendly ground with him so—so's he would treat me like he does other folks."

Dave lapsed into moody silence, gazing down into the fire. Then, jerking his head up suddenly:

"But there's one who called his bluff, and that was Jacob Horn. Jacob was drivin' by in his buggy one day when Sank come to the end of a furrow near the road, and, in turnin' his hosses about, begin to jerk at 'em in that cruel way of his. Jacob drawed up his buggy and called to Sank and told him if he didn't lay off of them critters he'd have the law on him.

"Sank answered back somethin'; but he stopped jerkin' the hosses. And he's been afraid of Jacob ever since. I've seen it in his eyes when Jacob was around. He hates Jacob, but he's afraid of him."

"Then why don't you go to him an' tell him that you're goin' to have the law on him for treatin' his critters as he does, an' git him afraid of you, too?" the old woman asked.

Too astonished at the suggestion to catch the note of sarcasm in Aunt Hannah's voice, Dave gasped:

"Who, me?"

"Or," she continued inexorably, "you mought load yo' shotgun with buckshot an' go to him an' tell him that if ever he treated you disrespectful again you'd blow a hole through him."

And Dave muttered stupidly again: "Who, me?"

"Them stripe of varmints who treats their dumb critters like you say Sank does his is allers a coward at their black hearts, an' ef you was to do as I say he'd quail befo' you."

"But, Aunt Hannah, I—I——"

"I know, Dave," she interrupted him, "bein' as you is, an' as you allers has been, them things ain't for you. The only way for you is to do as you have been tryin'—git on a common ground with him. But you'll never do that with sich as him till you git on the common ground of rascality."

"But—Aunt Hannah," he stammered, "you wouldn't want me to turn rascal."

The sarcasm was so rife in her voice as she replied that it would not escape even the troubled Dave:

"Ef I was a man," she said slowly, "I don't know which would set heavier on my conscience, to put up with sich as you been puttin' up with from Sank, or to turn rascal. But they ain't but one way for you. Now you shet up, Dave Renfroe, an' listen to me. An' you act on what I tell you, an' I'll promise you Sank won't never bother you no mo'."

Pointing the long reed stem at the little man, returning it to her lips only often enough to keep the spark in her pipe alive, pausing now and again to think, she outlined a plan to him. And as the plan was slowly unfolded, he shrank away from her in a kind of horror; and when she was finished he rose hastily from his chair and backed away from her across the room to the door.

"Aunt Hannah," he said as he held the door open to leave, "you—you—you're a—a hell-cat!" But Aunt Hannah only chuckled to herself and knocked out her pipe against her horny old palm.

In spite of his natural shrinking from what Aunt Hannah had told him to do, the more Dave thought it over the more he felt that it was the only way out for him. No sleep came to him that night;

but throughout the long hours he wrestled with himself, and when the dawn came he was fully committed. And, now that he had given himself up to the thing, he set about it with a sense of relief.

Down in his lot, which joined Sank's lot, Dave waited at the dividing fence until, as was his custom the first thing every morning, the man came down with a pail of swill for his hogs. Dave called to him several times; but, though he knew that Sank could not but hear him, the man paid him no heed, which was one of his minor ways of treating Dave with contempt.

Although he reddened with mortification at this treatment, Dave climbed the fence and followed him down to the pig sty and waited until Sank had poured in the swill and turned about and glanced contemptuously down at him, the sleep yet unwashed from his puffed, sneering face.

"What you barkin' around at my heels for, cotton-top?" he asked with all the insult which he could summon into his voice.

"Sank, I—I sold Jacob Horn ten bushel of corn and he—he beat me down from the dollar I was askin' to ninety-five cents the bushel."

"Wal, what you whin' to me about it for? You run on and stop botherin' me, or I'll set this here empty slop-bucket over yo' head an' chase you back over the fence."

"But, Sank, I heard when Jacob butted in on you about the treatmint of yo' hosses, which wasn't no business of his, was it? Don't seem to me a man like you'd put up with nothin' like that."

Hewett, who had started on, at once stopped and turned about.

"He'll hear from me yet, don't you worry," he said. "I'm jest layin' to catch him."

"I've thought of a way we can—can fix him," Dave said with an effort.

"How's that?" Sank was all interest now.

"You know he drives down to the sto' every evenin' in his buggy. And it's dark befo' he starts. How would it do if we was to take out a couple of planks from the bridge over that branch where he comes out from his farm to the main road?"

Sank put his head on one side to reflect. Placing the pail on the ground, he slowly drew out a plug of tobacco and his knife. "Have some?" he invited, extending them toward Dave. It was the first concession Hewett ever had made the little man.

When Dave shook his head, he helped himself with great deliberation. Then, laughing shortly in an ugly way, he said:

"You sho are the fierce one, Dave."

"My blood's jest bilin'," Dave replied. "And I knowed you didn't have no love for Jacob."

"That sho would be the way to git even with him," Hewett reflected. "He'd smash up his new buggy, and maybe break a leg of that colt he's so proud of. I must say, Dave, you do seem to have a few brains in that cotton head of yourn. And I don't blame you for bein' sore at him 'bout that corn."

"There used to be a short crowbar round the barn when Pete lived here," Dave said. "Have you still got it?"

"In the feed room," Sank replied.

"We'll take that to loosen the planks with. They're put down with thirty penny nails. I helped build that bridge and I know they're down solid."

"I'll lend you the crowbar; but you'll have to take up the planks yo'self," said Hewett shiftily. "While I sympathizes with you, this ain't my funeral, you know."

"How about Jacob's bawlin' you out?"

"I'd like to kill him for that, of course."

"Then it's much yo' funeral as mine.

And I don't believe I could pry them boards up by myself. You'll have to help me."

Reflectively Sank scratched the stubble on his chin.

"Now I might do that," he said thoughtfully. "I'll go by and help you git 'em loose. Then you can take 'em up. We'll have to be there by good dark; but it gits dark down in the holler early. I'll be waitin' for you at my front gate with the crowbar. Whistle jest fo' you git there."

They moved slowly on together, and Sank dropped a familiar hand on Dave's shoulder. They were on common ground, a friendly basis at last. And never had Dave experienced greater fear and repulsion, or felt more loathing for the man at his side.

But he did not waver, and that evening, true to his appointment, he met Sank at the gate and they slunk down through the shadows to the hollow where the bridge crossed the little water course.

Darkness had fallen early, with a fine mist blowing in the air, so that in the pitch blackness of the hollow they experienced some difficulty in placing the crowbar effectively, in order to wrench up the planks. But this once accomplished, it was short work for Sank's powerful muscles to pry them loose.

"Now, Dave," he said hastily, as if in a hurry to get away, "you can git 'em up all right. I'll go down to the sto' same as usual; but you sorter stay around in the bushes and see how it works out."

"Yes, I—I thought I'd wait," Dave faltered.

"And, Dave," he added, at a sudden thought. "Don't leave that crowbar layin' around. Better take it back to my barn. You can come to the sto' later." Turning, he hurried away.

To Dave, left crouching in the darkness by the bridge, there came an almost hopeless inability to go on with this thing that was so foreign to his nature. He had left home without his coat, and the mist had soaked his blue denim shirt; and to the chill from the weather was added a nervous ague that shook him until his teeth knocked together. "I jes' can't do it," he muttered helplessly.

And then up on the hill at Jacob's lot gate he heard the rattle of a buggy. With a tremendous exertion of his will he pulled himself together and leaped to his feet. He would see the thing through.

When he entered the store a few minutes later, he came running, padding heavily. His hat was gone and his light hair seemed to stand straight up on his head; his eyes were wild and staring. His arms held out in front of him, and flapping in a strange sort of way, he rushed up to Sank Hewett, who was seated in Dave's old chair, leaning against the counter.

"Jacob——" he gasped. "He come on the bridge trottin'. We didn't figger he'd come on the bridge trottin'."

Sank had risen hastily to his feet, and he backed along the counter away from Dave, unmistakable terror in his face. Now he blurted:

"I ain't got nothin' to do with that. It was all yo' plannin'. You——" Then, catching himself, assuming an air of bewilderment, he asked: "What you talkin' 'bout, Dave? I—I don't know what you're talkin' about."

But he had checked himself too late, and he glanced with apprehension at the faces of those gathering about him and Dave.

Dave, turning to one side, thrust out his face toward Bud Sago, who was standing near, and said in a hushed voice, lowered almost to a whisper, and speaking as though Bud, too, were in the dread secret:

"We didn't mean to murder nobody, me and Sank didn't. We didn't figger he'd come on the bridge in a trot."

Bud shrank from Dave, as if afraid the little man might touch him, and he turned inquiring eyes to Sank, and Sank shrieked at him:

"He's crazy! The man's plum crazy! I don't know what he's talkin' about." He was edging along the counter toward the door.

But Jim Potter, the deputy sheriff, stood in his way. "What is this about you and Dave murderin' somebody?" he asked sternly.

"He's crazy!" Sank repeated. "I don't know what he's talkin' about." But his eyes roved wildly, and he shouted: "Git out of my way, Potter! Don't you try to stop me."

Jim, however, had been reinforced by the two Brown boys, who stood close behind him, and by Cal Redd, who stood at his side; so that Sank's way was effectively blocked.

"You don't go nowhere," Jim told him, "until we git the straight of this."

Sank shrank away from him, his hand resting upon the counter, as if for support. And his hand came into contact with the heavy tobacco cutter, which he caught up and swung threateningly above his head. But Will Tacon, leaning across the counter, seized the cutter from behind and snatched it from his hands.

Those in front of Sank had scattered somewhat when he had raised aloft his murderous weapon, and now he rushed through their midst, bowling over the deputy sheriff, a slight man, who still had stood in his path, knocking him sprawling on the floor. Jim got up laughing, dusting his hands together.

At the open door, Hewett stopped suddenly and staggered back, his eyes staring as if he had seen a ghost. For there in the doorway stood Jacob Horn.

"You seem surprised to see me," Jacob said in his quiet way. "I been waitin' out here. Picked Dave up near my place, just as I turned into the main road, and we drove down together. He told me to wait outside here while he pulled off a little play-actin' as a joke on you, which all the boys was in on. You been jokin' him pretty rough, Sank; but it looks like he's turned the tables."

"But he—he said you was killed—murdered!" Hewett stammered.

"I didn't hear him say that," Jacob replied. "He only hinted at it. I reckon the murder was in yo' own guilty conscience."

"You—you say Dave was j-jokin' me?" the man stuttered, his voice rising as his terror turned into sudden rage.

"And looks like he got away with it," Jacob replied, his bearded lips breaking into a slow, unaccustomed smile.

"Then I'll learn him who to fool with!" Hewett was raging now. "I'll knock him down and stomp him! I'll mangle him!"

He started precipitately for Dave; but big Hal Jones stepped in his way, barring his progress.

"Sank," he said, a steely glint in his eyes, "we've been treatin' this as a joke, so far; but if you're hankerin' to turn it into a fightin' bee, then I claims the honor of accommodatin' you."

His eyes wavering before Hal's direct gaze, Sank muttered something broken and unintelligible. At this time of his testing he was proving himself, as Aunt Hannah had predicted that he would, a rank coward.

Pete Boleman, a shrewd dealer in horses and land, of whom it was said that he never let an opportunity for a good trade go by unchallenged, leaned suddenly from the box on which he had taken his seat and plucked Sank's sleeve.

"Sank," he said; and again he called him. And when Sank turned slowly

and looked sullenly down at him, Pete told him: "Sank, that offer I made on yo' place still stands, whenever you're ready to sell."

For a moment Sank glowered at him. Then:

"All right, git yo' money," he said with a fine show of blustering anger. "I don't care to live no longer in sich a neighborhood as this."

"Meet me in the mornin' at Pap Foster's, the J. P. My money'll be waitin'."

Sank turned and strode out of the crowd of men. Near the door he turned again. Shaking his fist in their direction, he said fiercely:

"You be there early, Pete Boleman. The sooner I git away from among sich folks as you-all, the better it will suit me."

Still with his fine show of anger, he stormed out of the place; but he was followed by a chorus of derisive laughter.

PINE TREES

By James Edward Hungerford

TH' pine trees whisper songs t' me—
Ol' Nature's sweetest melody;
With heads held proudlike in th' sky,
They sing me hymn an' lullaby,
O' life an' love an' hope an' peace—
I jest know God is *in* them trees,
His wond'rous glories manifest
T' us—*His children o' th' West.*

T' them that has th' ears t' *hear,*
Them trees jest brings ol' heaven near,
An' whispers o' th' things t' be,
An' lets us glimpse eternity;
T' them that's deaf, they's only *pines,*
With funny little sticker spines,
But *me,* who's camped on mountain trails
O' nights—they's told some *funny* tales.

Th' wind a-whisperin' through 'em soft,
Brings tunes from Heaven's organ loft,
An' angels playin' on sweet harps
O' love—without no flats er sharps;
Jest *perfect* strains o' harmony,
From Heaven's heart—direct t' *me,*
Who's strained his mortal ears t' catch
O' Paradise—a little snatch.

I reckon when God made them trees,
T' whisper his own symphonies,
Th' Master Artist o' all art,
Put in 'em His own lovin' heart,
An' thought o' all th' joy they'd bring,
T' make his children's hearts t' sing;
An' with them trees he's shorely blessed—
We uns—*His children o' th' West!*

A King Indeed!

By Charles V. Brereton

Author of "His Lordship's Son," etc.

THE STORY OF A ROYAL ANIMAL, THE GREAT-HEARTED BUCK OF THE FOREST PRESERVE. . . . . .

IF the venturesome tourist cares to dare the trail that starts from the prickly-pear-covered flats of the Arroyo San Miguel and follows it, in its devious way up the sun-baked sides of El Toro Blanco to the high ranges on the north side of the San Jacintos, he will meet with considerable of a surprise. Because of the suddenness of the transition it is as though he had taken passage on Aladdin's magic carpet and in an incredibly short time had been transported from the desert, with its drab mystery and innumerable annoying, pestiferous members of the vegetable and insect world, to the scented glory of the Northern woods.

Almost without warning the equestrian finds himself in an Alpine forest of pine and fir and cedar, with shady cañons that echo to the tingle of toylike cascades and dotted with miniature meadows carpeted with velvety, emerald-green turf, their edges rimmed with slender willows, whose feathery fronds bow obeisance to the morning dew. This is the *Tenajas los Altos*.

It is an isolated locality, little known not only because of its small size but also because of its wide protecting border of barren sand and repellent, spiny thickets. Within the ring of watchful outposts Nature has thrown around this little forest, it is by contrast a veritable Garden of Eden, known to few except the lean, leather-chapped rangers who ride the dizzy trails and the dark-skinned men who slip silently up from the tule-thatched dobes at Temecula in persistent attempts to poach on the scanty wild life the rangers guard so assiduously.

In the Tenajas, at the edge of the largest and prettiest meadow, was *El Rey* born. Of course, he was not named *El Rey* at that time, but there is no doubt that his dainty young mother, like all other mothers, had visions of her little son some day becoming a great leader of his people. Just now, as she cropped the grass with nervous energy, she cast many an anxious glance at the willow thicket where her baby, his spotted coat blending perfectly with the sun-shot gloom of his leafy bower, lay hidden. Although this was her first baby, the little doe knew by instinct that no vagrant breeze would carry the fawn's

scent to cruel, bloodthirsty nostrils. As yet there was no trail for coyote or cat to follow where the infantile, pointed feet had trod but still a mother's anxiety obsessed her. Something might happen, she felt, and so she watched as she ate.

And something did happen. The old coyote who had watched the doe since she first came into the meadow knew well that she had a fawn hidden near by. Wise from his years of thievery, the gray-nosed old marauder also knew that very young fawns leave no scent and that their protective coloration makes them well nigh invisible so long as they remain quiet. Knowing all this, the coyote slunk noiselessly into the thicket, always keeping down wind from the doe—the little mother had not yet learned to always hide her baby up wind while she was feeding so that she might instantly detect danger to him.

Back and forth, with a conscientious attention to detail that was worthy of a far better cause, the coyote tirelessly examined every inch of the thicket. A brush rabbit scuttled away in terror from his soft-footed advance but he gave it no heed save to mark the fact that a rabbit lived in these willows. His reasoning doubtless was that a rabbit would not travel far from home while the trim little black-tail doe might move her fawn at any moment. A mountain quail, with a startled twitter, whirred off her nest from under his very nose and, safe on a near-by limb, called aloud in her anguish. Here was a dainty titbit that required no effort to secure and the ladrone of the Tenajas made a half dozen gulps of the warm eggs.

His slavering jaws still dripping from his cruel feast, the yellow bandit resumed his hunt for the fawn. But the terror-stricken fluttering of the hen quail and the champing of the coyote's jaws had awakened the thicket. Two limpid, dark eyes watched the destruction of the quail's nest in staring horror and, as the ruthless hunter took the first step again in his search, there was a flurry in the foliage before him. A spotted something flashed through the willows, bounding with almost incredible speed straight toward the meadow. Old Mother Nature had given *El Rey* his first lesson in danger. With a snarl of baffled rage and greed the coyote sprang after his prey. A leap or two brought him into the open but what he saw there made him slow his ravenous rush to a cautious trot.

To the coyote's astonishment the fawn did not, as such inexperienced youngsters usually do, bound straight across the open ground in a fearsome race for life from the red-jawed terror that pursued him. *El Rey*, it appeared, was made of sterner stuff. Perhaps Mother Nature, out of her vast wisdom, had already selected this male of the species as a future leader for the rapidly vanishing deer that frequented the rugged cañons of the San Jacintos. Whatever the reason, the coyote soon found that he would have to exercise all of his evil ingenuity if he would succeed in separating the fawn from its mother.

Side by side they stood, the fawn pressed against his mother's quivering flank, their heads always facing the danger that threatened. And in *El Rey's* dark little eyes there was no timidity. Rather, was the gleam that shone from them a growing lust for battle. It may be that the doe noted this and regained somewhat her own presence of mind for she made flashing, lightninglike rushes at the attacker, keeping that hoary old villain busy dodging in order that his own hide might be saved from injury. The coyote was under no illusions as to the potential danger there was in the sharp-edged hoofs that struck at him so viciously. But the blood lust was strong and he was hungry for young fawn. He drew back and sat down to wait patiently as he watched the two wild things that confronted him.

It was then that *El Rey* received his

second lesson in the dangers that would beset him in the life that lay before him. From the rock-topped ridge bordering the south edge of the little meadow there came a crash that jarred the drums of the fawn's sensitive ears. The coyote gave a convulsive leap and fell on his side, feebly struggling, while the red blood poured from a jagged hole behind his shoulder. As *El Rey* kept pace with his mother's great bounds toward the safety of the thicket he caught a whiff of a new, strange odor—the man scent. Without knowing why, he connected this scent with his mother's immediate flight and knew, as he raced at her heels far into the depths of a shady cañon, that one must seek safety in immediate flight when this odor tainted the pine-scented air.

Ranger Phil Ross, lately appointed guardian of the Tenajas game refuge, ejected the empty shell from his carbine and replaced the gun in the saddle holster.

"One more coyote that won't bother young fawns again, Tom," he remarked to his companion. The other man nodded carelessly.

"What's the use of saving fawns from the coyotes only to have those Mex-Injun half-breeds kill 'em off before they get two years old? About all that sneaking Jose Ybarra does nowadays is to poach on the refuge."

"Well, I'm going to put a stop to that, also," Ross said. "We can't prevent them from hunting outside the refuge boundary during the open season but if I ever catch one of those poachers inside I'll sure deal him a bunch of misery. I don't believe there are more than a few dozen deer left in the San Jacintos and the Tenajas Altos is the only place where they are not harried and shot at from morning until night during every day of the open season." As he swung on his horse Ross chuckled reminiscently.

"But did you see that spunky little cuss keep his head to the coyote all the time? Acted like he had about half a mind to fight instead of running. I'll bet a cooky he makes a life of it, even with the big chances against him."

The two rangers rode off on their patrol of the refuge, keeping their interminable watch for those who, with firearms, would wantonly destroy the last of the blacktail in the southland, or by fire, would as wantonly destroy the shelter and food that rightfully belong to the woods people, whether they be furred or feathered.

Many times that summer, just as the cañons turned to purple and sapphire with the evening haze, Ross saw *El Rey* and his mother in the little meadow—Coyote Meadow, he called it now with the aptness of the mountaineer's nomenclature. Because his mother had wisely selected the best forage area in the Tenajas in which to raise her fawn and as a consequence furnished him with nature's baby food in abundance, *El Rey* grew like a weed. Before the first skiff of snow had whitened El Toro Blanco's rugged head the little buck was half as large again as is usual in one of his age. His wariness, too, seemed to be in proportion to his size. Often, Ross amused himself by leaving his horse behind some rock or screen of bushes and attempting to slip up on the two deer but he seldom succeeded in getting very close. At the slightest sound of breaking twig, or the merest suspicion of the dreaded man scent, *El Rey* was in full flight for the shelter of the chaparral.

Had he but given it a thought, the ranger was giving the young buck the most intensive instruction in guarding against danger from human beings that it was possible for him to receive. But the man, grinning silently, sometimes did get so close that he could see the movements of the buck's quivering nostrils as he searched the air for scent of

the danger his instinct told him was there. As the protective coloring of babyhood fell away and *El Rey's* coat turned to the dun color that was his heritage, Ross noticed an odd ring of lighter-colored hair that encircled the little fellow's head on a level with the butts of his ears.

"Gosh!" Ross muttered, "that mark looks as if the little cuss had a crown on his head. Maybe he's intended to be the king of the bucks on the Tenajas." With that thought, the rest followed as a matter of course. Ross never spoke of the buck again except to call him *El Rey*—the King.

When the lean days of late Fall came to the high summits and the deer began to move downward toward the dry grass pastures on the steep hillsides above the San Miguel, Ross also moved and made his camp at the lower boundary of the refuge. Here he soon found he had to redouble his vigilance against the persistent invasions of the cholo poachers from Temecula.

The previous guardian of the refuge, it appeared, had been somewhat prone to a life of ease, spending most of his winter days in pool halls or around the stove in the stuffy little hotel while the poachers killed deer as they willed in the restricted feeding grounds the animals were now obliged to occupy. But Ross was a different type. His indefatigable attention to his work amazed the lawless hunters and gradually convinced most of them, that here was a man they could not fool with. Jose Ybarra, though, thought differently.

"Who ees thees R-r-ross?" he inquired of a sympathetic assemblage one night after having amplified his courage by liberal potations of aguardiente. "Why shall he tell us, whose people were here before the cursed gringo came, that we shall not hunt in the winter on the San Miguel? I, Jose Ybarra, will be the one to show heem that we of the Pueblo Temecula will follow the customs of our fathers, as we have always done."

This vainglorious proclamation of intention came in time to the ears of Ross but he only set his square jaws more firmly and increased the length of his day's work. Then came the morning when, just as the winter sun was turning the distant gray peaks to jutting points of rose and amber, the crack of a 30-30 resounded from a glade not two hundred yards from where Ross lounged in his saddle, waiting for that selfsame whiplike report.

The buckskin horse went down the slope to the glade at a speed that timed the distance in seconds and as he lunged over the sparse sage, his rider saw a hulking, black-browed man in tattered overalls standing over a huddled dun heap in the middle of the glade. Ybarra, for it was he, was vainly trying to bring his rifle to bear on another deer, a white-crested young buck who reached the sanctuary of the brush cover just as Ross took in the situation with one quick glance.

At the sound of the plunging hoofs behind him, the poacher whirled on his heel, in the same motion firing from the hip. He missed and his rifle clattered to the ground as a bullet from the ranger's pistol bored through his shoulder. The rest was a mere matter of legal procedure. The justice gave Ybarra six months, afterward apologizing profusely to Ross because he had not made the sentence heavier.

"Six months was the most I could give him for a game violation, Phil," the justice averred, "and he claims his rifle went off accidentally when you rushed him. I doubt if we could make a case of attempted assault stick without witnesses. I wish I could have sent the skunk to the pen. He's going to be mighty dangerous when he gets out. You'll have to watch him or he'll get revenge for that shot."

"I'm not worrying," Ross answered, "I intend to make these cholos understand that they'll have to obey the law the same as white people and I'll arrest Ybarra every time I catch him inside the refuge with a gun. That doe he killed was *El Rey's* mother and he was trying to get a shot at the buck when I caught him."

Ross did not see *El Rey* again until the middle of summer. The buck, though only a spike, was the size of a two year old and carried himself already with the wariness and sagacity of an old herd leader. The crown of light hair was almost white now and marked him for all eyes to see. He seldom went outside of the refuge but the few times he was seen by hunting parties he was, by tacit agreement of the white hunters, given immunity from pursuit. He still ranged, the greater part of the time, in the vicinity of Coyote Meadow and Ross watched his development with an interest that was akin to personal affection.

That winter Ybarra's activities must have been confined to something besides poaching. At least Ross never caught the half-breed inside the refuge. The next summer, however, a new constable down at Temecula, with a laudable ambition toward civic betterment of the community, began to make things decidedly uncomfortable for all persons of Ybarra's ilk whom he found unemployed. The ex-poacher, knowing that this time he would at least have to make a pretense of working, turned to the only job he knew much of and began, in a desultory sort of way, to act as guide to some of the parties of tourists who were now just beginning to flock into the Tenajas. On his first trip, Ross met him on the trail.

"Now see here, Jose," the ranger told him, "I'm glad you've gone to work and I don't intend to make any trouble for you as long as you behave yourself, but the moment you start to hunt inside this refuge, either for yourself, or in response to the bribes of your party, I'm going to get you, and get you hard. This is United States land and if you kill deer at the request of your party I'll have you all up for conspiring to violate United States law. That'll mean the penitentiary for you. The same applies to fires inside the reservation. Do you understand?"

Ybarra volubly expressed no desire whatever to transgress any laws. All he wanted, he said, was the chance to make an honest living and to be let alone. Ross rode on down the trail, ignoring the balance of Ybarra's oration, but if he had seen the malevolence with which the half-breed watched him until he was out of sight he might have been more careful that summer.

As for *El Rey,* he was now a king indeed. Because he had never known a moment's hunger in his life his horns grew in proportion to the rest of him. This second summer, when the bucks who ranged outside the refuge were adorned with unusually small horns, *El Rey's* were of a size that is rarely seen even on an old monarch of the northern ranges. While his massive antlers were hardening *El Rey* spent most of his time lying among the park-spaced pines, high upon the south slopes of the range and away from the eyes of men.

But soon the velvety covering of his horns began to itch intolerably and instinct told him what to do. Secure in the knowledge that he could now plunge through the thickest of chaparral without injury to his horns *El Rey* went back to Coyote Meadow, his home range and in the depths of the willows he rubbed and scraped his antlers against a slender tree trunk until the last shred of protecting skin had disappeared and they had shone forth, polished and pointed like rapiers of Damascus steel. One evening as Ross was riding homeward he saw the buck in the meadow

and pulled up his horse with a low whistle of surprise.

"Lord! What a set of horns!" he exclaimed. "Four points on each side and two feet between the beams, if they're an inch. Old fellow, I'm afraid they'll get you this summer if you don't stay inside the refuge."

El Rey, his massive coronet held with the haughty carriage of a born monarch, trotted away. Of late he had learned to distinguish between those humans who wished him harm and those who did not. Perhaps some dim remembrance of the far past told him it was the friendly ranger to whom he owed his life, not once, but twice. At any rate he turned at the edge of the thicket and, with a regal disregard of possible danger, stared at the man for a long moment, before seeking the cool seclusion of his home thicket. But not always was the wily buck so contemptuous of danger. On those rare occasions on which he strayed outside the boundaries of the refuge no slinking bobcat could have been more clever in keeping hidden from greedy eyes than was *El Rey.*

The straggling parties of summer visitors, with their heavy footed horses and high-pitched chatter he held in contempt. His sensitive ears were sufficient protection from such people and long before they were within rifle range the buck would be safely hidden in some clump of manzanita or greasewood where, himself unobserved, he could watch the passing tourists with curious eyes. Thus he added to his knowledge of human beings. Dogs he had no experience of, and for good reason. The stockmen of the San Jacintos as well as the rangers did not approve of hunting dogs and their carbines were always ready. A deer hound's first wailing bawl was mighty apt to be his last.

But what *El Rey* did not know was that Jose Ybarra was a master of his craft. Several times the keen eyes of the half-breed guide had spied the buck's head, frozen into immobility, as *El Rey* watched the passing tourists and Ybarra had licked his lips avariciously at sight of the magnificent antlers. Late in the summer, impelled by some urge that he could not fathom, the buck took to frequenting a great brush area at the east edge of the refuge where the trail to Temecula crossed a barren ridge that was just outside the reservation. The guide, with his uncanny ability in woodcraft, knew exactly where *El Rey* had made his bed.

One day a party of tourists, travelling with less noise than was usual, rode up on the ridge and, stopping their horses, dismounted as though waiting for something. *El Rey* watched them curiously, a little apprehensive of their clumsy attempts at stealth. They could not see him, he knew, and on the gentle breeze that floated down the slope there was as yet no taint of the hated half-breed, the one man he was afraid of. Had the buck realized the full extent of Ybarra's cunning, he would not have been so careless, but would have slipped in soft-footed silence around the hillside into the refuge. As it was though, he remained immovable, staring at the tourists until a slight noise in the brush below him caused him to turn sharply, his neck hair bristling. And just then the taint of Ybarra's scent reached him. *El Rey* did not know just where the half-breed was nor did he know how many hunters were below him but he realized now that an attempt was being made to surround him. To think was to act. The buck lunged straight up the hill, heading for the wide trail above him.

At his first quick movement, a chorus of excited yells came from the group on the ridge. A rifle popped, then another, the bullets going wild, as might have been expected. Few tourists who need the services of a guide in the Western mountains have attained such pro-

ficiency in marksmanship that they can hit a blacktail buck when he is in a hurry. But *El Rey* knew exactly what he was doing. When he reached the cleared space in the chaparral that was the trail to the Tenajas he turned along the narrow highway as though aware—and perhaps he was—that here lay sanctuary. The rifles popped again a time or two and *El Rey* heard the half-breed's voice raised as though in angry expostulation.

"Stop that shooting, you fools!" Ybarra yelled, beside himself with rage. "The buck is inside the refuge now. You'll get us all pinched if you shoot any more."

Reluctantly the amateur hunters lowered their smoking rifles and, after the manner of their kind, commented excitedly, each offering various alibis for not hitting the magnificent buck. They were agreed in only one thing. *El Rey's* head, with its curious markings and great antlers, must come into their possession in some manner. The leader of the party, an important person who exuded wealth from every pore, loudly proclaimed that he would be willing to give a hundred dollars for that head. Ybarra heard that statement as he stood in the trail gazing after the fleeing deer and his ratlike eyes gleamed with insatiable greed.

"I'll get you, *Señor El Rey,*" he muttered. "I'll get you all by myself. That damned ranger had better look out next time I hunt alone." The guide's face was a contorted mask of fury as he rubbed a stiffened shoulder with his free hand and sullenly motioned the party on their way up the trail.

From a distant lookout point, Ross heard the shooting and it was not many hours before he stood on the ridge overlooking the great expanse of dense brush that flanked the refuge. A study of the horse and man tracks on the ridge, the empty cartridge shells scattered about and *El Rey's* wide-spaced tracks in the chalky dust of the trail told him much, but not all he wanted to know.

"Ybarra must have been trying to drive that buck out of the refuge so he could be killed with at least a pretense of obeying the law," he mused, "but this time he didn't succeed. I'll have to watch this trail for a while."

The ranger knew as well as did Ybarra that the buck, having for some reasons of his own, selected the brush patch as his home would return to it as soon as the momentary fright of the morning had worn away. So it was that Ross gave this boundary of the game refuge more of his attention than usual, leaving his partner to watch the higher pastures of the Tenajas. On his way out to Temecula, however, the guide plodded sulkily along at the head of his party, paying no attention to their requests that he again attempt to chase the big buck out of the brush patch.

Several days went by and Ross began to think that perhaps he was wasting his time when one forenoon, as he sat idly on the ridge and gazed into the heat haze that rose from the great valley to the South, a thin spiral of smoke rising from the cañon immediately beneath him caught his eye.

"Good God!" the ranger gasped as he sprang toward his horse. "If that fire gets a start it will sweep the whole range."

Ross rode recklessly down the mountain, urging his horse with blows of the reata he took from the saddle horn. He had a half mile to go before reaching the trail that cut through the brush and his steel-trap mind was already planning how best to control the fire. If help came quickly, as he was sure it would, he might succeed in holding the fire at the trail for a little while. To the west, two hundred yards inside the refuge, was a narrow glade that stretched from trail to cañon floor. The triangular space inside the refuge formed by trail and

glade would be the place to attempt to hold the fire, he thought, so it would not burn up into the timber of the Tenajas.

Outside the reservation line it could burn where it willed unless volunteers from among the stockmen put it out. Just now, speed was the important thing. He must get to the trail well in advance of the onrushing flames. Over excited and reckless in his hurry, Ross once more cruelly whipped his horse.

The plunging animal, stung by the pain of the whizzing rawhide, lost his usually equable temper and, taking the bit in his teeth, bucked viciously straight down the steep slope. Many a better rider than the ranger would have been unseated. Ross felt himself going and clawed vainly at the saddle for support but his clutching hand only grasped the coiled reata and he was flung headlong, landing with a sickening crash in a clump of sage at the edge of the trail. The horse, his fright augmented by the flapping stirrups, continued his wild race down the trail.

At his first attempt to move, the exquisite pain that shot through him told Ross that his left leg was broken. For a moment his only thought was of the fire and the damage it would do and he cursed his own stupidity for attempting such a reckless ride. Then as he heard the crackling roar below him and noted the pall of black smoke that was already beginning to obscure the sun his anger turned to uneasiness.

The fire was spreading in a wide semicircle, the billowing flames, fanned by the wind that now was rustling the parched leaves of the chaparral, throwing their forked, black-tipped tongues a hundred feet in the air. On occasion, the fiery fingers would flatten against the steep hillside at the behest of the breeze and would, with a sound like the tearing of a Brobdingnagian sheet, catch fire to the brush at the extreme of their reach, rods away. Ross knew it would be only a matter of moments until the oncoming holocaust would reach the trail, shriveling and destroying all things animate in its path. If he only had the strength to reach the swampy, green-carpeted glade!

The tortured man essayed an attempt to crawl but the first movement wrung from him an involuntary groan of pain. He leaned weakly back against a rock, oblivious of the rain of fine powdered ashes that grayed his sweat-dampened face. His mind worked at lightning speed in a search for the solution of his problem. Safety was so near and yet so impossible of attainment. Ross was not essentially a religious man but a long-forgotten prayer began to form in his mind as he felt the ever-increasing temperature of the heat waves that seared his face.

Now the rampart of brush below the trail was alive with the fluttering and scrambling of the little woodspeople as they fled before the advance of the fire. A wood rat, his beady eyes twinkling his apprehension, scuttled up the bank without noticing a fox who slunk by. Jays, scolding harshly, hopped from bough to bough as though reluctant to leave the shelter of the thicket; a coyote loped down the trail, never deigning a glance at a rabbit who sat motionless in huddled fear. And then there came the "chug—chug" of heavy hoofs on hard ground. A buck was fleeing for his life from the fire. Involuntarily, scarce realizing what he was doing, Ross whirled a sizable loop in the reata he still held in his hands.

The trail was a scant twenty feet from where the man lay. Ross knew he could rope any animal that would flee past him. But what would happen after his loop had tightened? Would catching the deer he knew was coming down the trail be of any aid to him? It was a slim chance for life, but it was the only one. Ross' eyes lighted as he saw the size of

the deer who plunged toward him through the smoke and dust. He tossed the rawhide loop as calmly as though he were roping horses in a corral: and then he groaned in mortal agony as the buck, now in an absolute frenzy of fear, lunged against the drag of the coil that had so cleverly caught him around the shoulders where he could pull the most without being choked.

To understand how *El Rey,* of scarce more than the man's own weight, could drag that recumbent form along the trail toward the safety of the swamp one must remember that Ross himself, instead of bracing against the pull of the rope, was trying with all his might to crawl forward and that the terrible excess of fear which gripped the ensnared animal gave him temporarily a threefold strength. As *El Rey* bucked and plunged at the drag of the rope Ross was jerked along through the dust, rolling, tumbling; his lungs choked with the chalky powder that rose from the trail and his hair singed by the terrific heat roaring up from the furnace below him.

It seemed to the man only an instant until his terrible ride was over and he had passed out of the stifling, heated gases into the comparatively clear air of the glade. As he felt the swampy ground beneath his body he released his hold on the reata and buried his blistered face in the damp, cool grass. He was now saved from the most frightful of deaths and though he was in agony from the freshly wrenched muscles of his leg, Ross knew it would be only a short time until his partner or some party of volunteer fire fighters would come to his succor. It was with this thought then, that he turned his head in welcome expectation at the sound of a man's step behind him. His eyes widened in astonishment not umixed with fear as he saw Ybarra, rifle raised for a blow, standing over him.

"Ah! You are conscious then, Señor Ross," the half-breed sneered. "I am glad. Now I can tell you what I am going to do and you will know what a mistake you made, you damn gringo, when you shot Jose Ybarra. I set the fire this morning, expecting to kill *El Rey* as he ran out of the brush, but I did not hope to get such a wonderful prize in my trap as this. I'm going to knock you on the head and throw you into the brush to wait the coming of the fire. They who find you will say, of course, that the brave Señor Ross died fighting the fire. But you and I will know the truth of what happened and you will no more bother the poor people of Temecula. Is it not so?"

Ross knew he was helpless to protect himself. He had no weapon of any kind and one glance at Ybarra's face convinced him that months of brooding over his fancied wrongs had unbalanced the breed's mind and driven him insane with a desire for revenge.

The guide could get away with it too, Ross knew. One flash of that searing flame in his lungs and he would be a shriveled, blackened thing that would never be examined for wounds. They would notice the broken leg and would think he had fallen among the rocks and been caught by the advancing flames. His name would be placed on the memorial tablet at Washington with the notation "Died while on Duty" and for a few days Ybarra would receive the plaudits of Temecula as being the hero who had found the body. It was plausible—devilishly so.

All this Ross saw in one flash of thought that seared his brain as though by a lightning stroke. But he could not bear to think of the slow torture of waiting for the fire to take his life. He must incense the half-breed until Ybarra, beside himself with rage, would deal him the mercy of a quick death. The ranger's lips curled in a sneer, his level gaze searching the guide's contorted face.

"You haven't the nerve, Ybarra," he said contemptuously, "You dare not kill a white man, you greasy cholo." Shuddering as though from a blow, Ybarra stepped forward, his rifle butt upraised again. Ross involuntarily shut his eyes only to instantly open them at the awful scream that came from the half-breed's throat. For a moment Ross could not understand what it was that had happened, then he, too, yelled in horror.

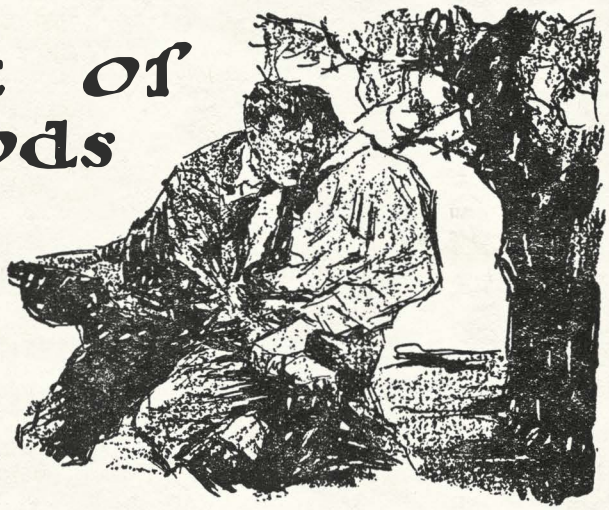
El Rey, his every hair bristling and his great eyes glowing with the green light of *must,* had the guide pinned to the ground and was crushing out Ybarra's life with terrible strokes of hoofs and horns.

Why had the buck, with his way to the cool recesses of the Tenajas unbarred, slipped his shoulders out of the coil of the loosely dragging rope and returned to this attack? Was it simply the lust for battle caused by the guide's repeated attempts on his life or did he have some remembrance of the debt he owed to the wounded and helpless ranger? Whatever the real cause—and that will doubtless never be known—the enraged monarch of the Tenajas was now meeting out to Ybarra a death more terrible than the latter had been promising Ross. Not satisfied with the fearful thrust of his stiletto-armed head that he had given the half-breed, the enfuriated buck trampled and gored the moaning body until Ross turned his face away, sickened at the sight.

As if sure his enemy was dead, *El Rey* ceased his terrible occupation and stood back, snorting his defiance. For an instant he turned his angry eyes on the other man and Ross felt that his own time had come, but just then there came from up the trail the sound of trampling hoofs and the jingle of spurs as a party of stockmen, attracted by the smoke, rode toward the fire.

El Rey bounded up the side hill toward the barren top of the ridge. On the summit, his regal head outlined against the sky, he turned and looked back as though for a last glimps of the wounded man who was feebly waving him a thankful farewell.

A Gift of the Gods



by Carroll John Daly

Author of "The Charity Brawl," etc.

CHESTER ROBINSON WAS UNDER A CLOUD. IT WAS TERRIBLE. HE HAD BEEN BEATEN IN A KNIGHTLY CONTEST. IN THE DAYS OF OLD, THE BIG KNIGHTS FOUGHT WITH LANCES—BUT MOST LIKELY THE LITTLE KNIGHTS DID PRECISELY AS CHESTER AND EDDIE DID! . . . . . .

WITH good-natured tolerance, Professor H. Remington Blakely listened to the conversation of his wife and twelve-year-old daughter. It was anything but enlightening, but then he knew that there was time for work and time for play. So far as the little pleasures of his daughter, Margie, went, Professor Blakely left the matter entirely in the hands of his wife; assuming, of course, that they never overstepped the bounds of propriety—that is, his bounds of propriety. He smiled as he sipped his coffee and gave an attentive ear to Mrs. Blakely as she enumerated the children who were to be the guests at Margie's birthday party two months later. All such affairs were arranged with the utmost precision long periods in advance.

Mrs. Blakely went down the list in a monotonous voice as Margie nodded her head after each name. If Mrs. Blakely should skip a name it was Margie's duty to remind her that such and such a party was expected to attend.

"Harry Percy, Charlie Clayton, Harold Gordon, Chester Robinson——" Mrs. Blakely paused. Margie had interrupted her. "Chester Robinson," she repeated, elevating her eyebrows. The reading of the names was a matter of form only. Mrs. Blakely never forgot anybody; she did not expect to be interrupted.

"Not him," Margie broke in again.

"Why, I thought you liked him better than any other boy?" Mrs. Blakely was surprised into the question.

"I don't want him." Margie was emphatic.

"But my dear, his mother and I——"

"But I don't want him."

"Only yesterday you were saying that——"

"But I don't want him at my party. I don't like—I don't like him."

"You must understand——"

"Now, mother, you said it was my party and I could have who I wanted."

"I know, dear, but we must not make bad friends. There, tell me why you don't want him."

"I don't like him any more since—since—since——"

"Since what, dear?" her mother encouraged.

"Since—since he learned to spit like Eddie Collins."

"Learned to *what?*"

"Learned to spit like Eddie."

"I am afraid I do not understand, dear." Mrs. Blakely glanced apprehensively at the dignified attitude of her husband.

"Well, Eddie can spit nearly across the street and Chester is tryin'——"

"But Eddie is coming." Mrs. Blakely broke in hurriedly, casting another hasty look toward her husband. "And if Eddie spits——"

A sudden dry cough broke off further speech. Mother and daughter turned anxiously toward Professor Blakely. Professor Blakely cleared his throat again. It was understood that he was about to give voice to his thoughts.

"The word is expectorate, my own." Professor Blakely regarded his wife reprovingly. "Expectorate! However, under the best of circumstances the conversation is not edifying—shall I say neither eloquent nor elegant. And I am sorry to say that Margie is right and that you are wrong. She does not wish to have Chester at her party because of his vulgar exhibition. Such sentiment is worthy of a daughter of mine. That others may practice the same—hum—indignity is of no moment. That they will visit this house is also beyond the question. You know their parents; society bids you welcome them. In their attitude Margie sees no harm. They are not, as we might say, her chosen company, but neighbors which she must tolerate. Such, my dear, is the way of life." He paused a moment and held aloft his finger.

"But I repeat, I have often heard Margie speak of this Chester Robinson. She admired him; built in him her ideal of American boyhood. The doings of the common herd do not interest her, but the fall of the ideal that she has placed above——" He stopped, and realizing the uselessness of trying to explain the working of the human mind, finished:

"I see that you do not exactly follow me. But my child is right. She has been hurt to the very quick. Chester Robinson is not to be one of the party—unless—unless—Margie is enough interested in this particular young man to chance his habits. But there must be no outside influence brought to bear. The child must work out this problem alone with her conscience." Professor Blakely raised his cup to his lip and finished his coffee. It was cold. Too late he realized that brevity is the soul of wit.

Chester Robinson, heretofore popular hero of his neighborhood, leaned against a fence and watched in disgust the performance of Eddie Collins who had lately overshadowed his former greatness.

"Did you see that last one? I measured it. Thirty-two feet. None of us could come nowheres near it." Harold Gordon approached Chester and sung the praises of his rival in his burning ears.

"Ah! That ain't nothin'. What do you suppose I care about that?" Chester was not taking his defeat gracefully.

"Sorehead." With a laugh of derision Harold returned to the admiring throng that were watching Eddie as he demonstrated in the sudden popular sport of long-distance expectorating.

For some time Eddie entertained with the technique of his urbane art. Then he grew tired and a bit dry. He realized that if he was to continue his supremacy he must conserve his energy. He knew that his sudden rise in the eyes of the world was due entirely to chance. His

great accomplishment came through no effort of his own.

It was a gift of the gods! A wonderful power long lain dormant and unrecognized within him. His fame had risen overnight. When he first discovered his great natural gift he himself did not know. But, that glory and honor were now his was beyond question. Small boys followed him about; lied to other small boys about his achievements when no eyes but theirs were watching. There was one story that goaded Chester beyond all others. It had been whispered about that Eddie had reached across Main Street, a feat hitherto unaccomplished by any water short of the fire hose itself.

"I tell you what," Eddie finally told the other boys. "I ain't goin' ta enter any more contests. You fellers have your own contests and I'll meet the best of ya—say every Saturday afternoon. You all know I'm champeen, so what's the use?" With a shrug of his shoulders he retired from the curb, and, slouching toward the fence, regarded Chester with majestic condescension, "Gee, it's tough, Ches." He shook his head and knitted his brows. "But the boys will have me do it. Why there ain't another boy—no—nor a man neither for miles and miles what can beat——"

"Ah! Don't talk to me." Chester pulled his cap down over his eyes, and, turning his back upon his former companion and junior partner, walked up the street and seated himself in a distant and lonely section of the gutter. How things had changed! A few short days ago Eddie would not have dared to address him like that.

Eight or ten boys stood upon the curb and contested for the honor of meeting the distinguished Eddie in single combat. Small boys measured the distance and shouted encouragement. Pretty little girls who for a while had held aloft from such plebeian sport slowly yielded to the allurement of Eddie's popularity. One and all admitted that Eddie Collins stood alone. He had no peer.

A messenger boy turned the corner and advancing along the sidewalk watched the general exhibition. For a time he serenely contemplated and then his lips curled in scorn. Here was a game that he knew something about. Finally, tempted beyond endurance by the lack of skill, he set down his bundle and approached the curb.

He whistled a bit; then hummed a tune. At length having attracted sufficient attention he puckered up his lips and let the spectators see art as displayed by a master. An exclamation of surprise came from the onlookers. Several boys eagerly measured off the distance. There was a general feeling of excitement. Here was a boy who with apparent ease beat their best efforts.

"That's nothin'," the uniformed urchin modestly replied to the praise. "I often go farther than that."

All eyes turned toward Eddie. Here was a candidate worthy of the "champeen."

Eddie was quick to see the danger in this new rival. But he had faith in his own ability and sauntered toward the curb with easy assurance. With careful deliberation and a piercing eye he confronted the messenger boy.

"So you think you can beat me?" He placed a hand upon the newcomer's shoulder. "Let's look in your mouth," he said suddenly. The messenger recognized the insinuation and hidden insult in the request, but opened his mouth to the utmost. Eddie peered carefully within, although to the most casual observer it was apparent that nothing was secreted within that gaping cavity.

"Lookin' for grass," Eddie explained. "Now look in mine." He anticipated the coming desire of the new boy.

The boy willingly complied with this request, going so far as to insert a dirty finger to show the extent of his doubt of Eddie's integrity.

"Satisfied?" Eddie gulped, the water forming in his eyes.

"Yep; beat that last one."

"Oh, that—that ain't nothin'." Eddie stepped forward and placed his toes upon the edge of the curb. For half a minute or more he rolled his tongue about and twisted his face into queer conformations. Then he suddenly raised his head. Every boy stood silent, expectant, anxious. The "champeen" was about to hold up the reputation of the block.

"Gee!" and "Gee!" again. All gasped in astonishment. The mighty effort of the stranger was eclipsed. Eddie had beaten him by at least ten feet. The honor of the neighborhood was upheld.

For an hour the messenger boy left his package upon the sidewalk for the passer-by to kick about at will. But his exertions were useless. He had met his match.

Chester Robinson was disconsolate. Eddie's latest conquest was almost more than he could bear. Margie had seen it, too. He had seen her peeking from between a crack in the fence. Chester had not only lost his popularity in the neighborhood, but with it had gone the apple of his eye and the desire of his heart. Margie treated him with cold indifference. In fact she gave him, that which is commonly called in the very best books on etiquette, "the cut direct."

Even in the despair of his lost love he still retained his self-possession and manhood. He did not run to Margie and seek an explanation. He did not beg of her to explain this sudden coldness that was driving him mad. Nor did he drop his head before her proud and haughty look as she passed him while he expectorated in a hopeless endeavor to regain his lost honor. No, he was above all this. He resorted to the time-worn custom of sticking out his tongue and giving vent to the sage remark. "If you turn your nose any higher it might rain in and drown ya!"

To this remark she vouchsafed no answer other than to make a face. It never entered her head to try and reform him. There was more pleasure in thinking of her disappointed love and planning ways to make Chester suffer.

To Chester the whole thing was as clear as day. Margie was not deserting him because he could expectorate, but because he could not. Altogether he could not blame her. She had given her love to a hero that had not made good. But this thing was new to him. Give him time and he would show Eddie up, yet. Eddie had had the luck to discover that there was one thing he could do—and do well. He was making the most of it. Every day in the week was his day. Saturday was his banner day. A day that Chester kept off the block.

These Saturdays were long ones for Chester. It had been his habit to lead in all sports and Saturday had been a day of many triumphs. Now he was in the discard. He would take long walks out into the country, and, sitting alone beneath a giant oak, gaze dreamingly over the vast stretch of lake before him. So much water was almost an insult under the circumstances, but he faced it bravely. He must win out. The lake was clear, or fairly clear, but that was of little importance for the large quantity which Chester put into his mouth was returned again to the lake. The lake was a necessary part of his great project; besides, his mother had more than once spoken about his increasing huskiness.

There beneath the shady tree, where no eyes could see nor taunting voice mock his feeble efforts, he practiced for the day that he would meet and

defeat his rival, Eddie. What would Margie think then? How she would plead and cry that she had not understood! How she would wish that she had believed and understood the slogan; "A man may be down, but he is never out." Well, he'd show them!

Ring upon ring appeared, widened and disappeared again in the calm water. There was no encouragement. He knew that he was horribly, tragically deficient, but he kept persistently at his work. Eddie Collins had never beaten him at anything before, unless school work were counted; but such thoughts never entered Chester's head. Honors in that direction were welcome to those who wanted them. He was above such petty vanities.

And then when Chester felt that he was showing some slight improvement, a stranger entered the drama, bent on upsetting his plans. The stranger was a lanky youth a little bigger than Chester. He scowled fiercely when he noted the desecration of his favorite swimming pool.

"What you spittin' in my swimmin' pool for?" The stranger knitted his brows.

"What's that to you?" Chester did not like the tone of his voice. In fact, he resented it, so that he gave birth to an expectoration which was not in his usual curriculum, but entirely spontaneous. His face almost brightened at the distance of this involuntary eruption.

"Better not do that again." The bigger boy came nearer and removed his coat. This action might have been simply the necessary preparation for a dip, but Chester looked upon the action in a different light. Although he had no intention of entering the water, he arose and also removed his coat.

"What'd ya do that for?" The boy came even closer so that his shoulder almost touched that of Chester.

"Felt like it." Chester gave his shoulder a mighty shrug, meant to dislodge an imaginary hand. The movement was satisfactory, for he smiled in self-appreciation.

"Don't you spit in there again."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I say so."

"That's funny." Chester laughed, a mirthless laugh.

"What's funny?"

"Your face."

"Well, don't 'cha spit in that lake."

"What'll you do?"

"What's that to you?"

"Probably nothing."

This deep remark puzzled the lanky youth for some time; then he saw hidden insult in the words. He pretended to take the remark as the sign of weakening upon Chester's part.

"I'll bust ya one—that's what I'll do. What are you laughin' at?" The boy raised his voice.

"Oh, you say such funny things. You oughta be on the stage. You couldn't bust nothin'—'cept a balloon, and I don't know as you could even bust——"

"You spit and I'll show ya." The lanky youth stuck his fist close under Chester's nose.

Now if there was one thing that Chester could do and felt more like doing at that very moment than anything else, that thing was fight. He moved his lips in what might have been meant for a smile—a terrible smile—a moving-picture-villain smile. Then he turned his head and three times in quick succession dotted the lake. Facing the larger boy again he wiped his chin, and, sticking it forward, hissed dramatically:

"Now bust it and—and die." There was no acting on his part—no idle threat. To him it was all true; he meant what he said.

Chester's ethics of fighting were the standard. A fight never began suddenly. There was a long preliminary;

the passing of many remarks and threats of personal violence; the shoving and jostling about before the active combat began. But this boy was different. He had been taught that the first blow meant everything and experience convinced him that this lesson was no idle chatter. So he doubled his fist, and, accepting Chester's invitation to "bust" —busted.

The whole thing came as a surprise to Chester. He staggered back, gasped and spit out the tooth that had nearly choked him. But the losing of the tooth was of small importance; that particular incisor had been bothering him for some time anyway.

The lanky lad looked with pride upon his work. This one blow was generally the beginning and ending of his fights, for he had made a habit of fighting with boys smaller than himself, who usually ran or begged for mercy after his first terrible blow.

But Chester did neither of these things. When he was beaten in a battle the other boy had earned that battle and Chester felt assured that he was beaten by a better man. Now, he straightened himself—made one mad rush and in another moment had his opponent down and was pounding him unmercifully.

The battle was over. The lanky youth went the way of many another too courageous soul who had met Chester in the height of some great passion.

Chester arose and looked at his fallen enemy.

"You'll know better next time." he said, inserting a finger into the gap between his front teeth. "If you don't want no more, say 'Nuff,' and if ya do want more, why get up and bust me ag'in." With foolhardy courage he again stuck his chin forward as the stranger climbed to his feet.

"Nuff! The boy looked out of a swollen eye at the stury figure a good six inches shorter than himself.

"Now, just you watch me and see what I think of your old lake." Chester took the boy tightly by the arm and turned him toward the water. "I guess I'll just spit in your ole lake as much as I wanta. Lookit that—I—I——"

He paused, released the boy and stood spellbound. Could it be possible that that distant ripple could be the result of his effort? He tried again and then again; rubbed his hand across his eyes. Yes, something he had expected weeks of practice to accomplish had come to him suddenly. Then it all came to him. He understood the reason for this apparent phenomenon and turned to thank the boy who had knocked out his tooth and so made this miracle possible!

But the lanky youth was speeding away for friends and vengeance. But Chester did not worry on that score for he knew that he would never have occasion to visit that lake again. The thing that worried him now was—could he keep his great good fortune secret until Saturday?

Professor Blakely set down his coffee. "The party, I believe is next Saturday, just one week from to-day. Have all the invitations been sent out?" He was in a jolly mood and it was in keeping with his feeling of contentment that he should show some interest in the activities of his family.

"Yes, the invitations are all out. Margie mailed the last of them just before dinner." Mrs. Blakely nodded.

"Ah—and does Chester Robinson attend?"

"Why—yes. I believe——"

Professor Blakely raised a hand for silence.

"Let Margie tell me, my dear. If you recall I spoke upon this subject some time back. It was one of those problems of childhood that must be fought out by the child alone. I hope that you respected my wishes and did not influence our daughter."

"Why, no, I just——"

"Yes, I quite understand." He interrupted his wife again. "Now Margie—Chester Robinson is to come. Will you kindly tell your mother and me why you have changed your mind and can now welcome this—er—wayward boy among your guests. You respect him, of course?"

"Oh, yes, father. Oh, yes, how could I help it? Everybody respects him. He's just noble."

Professor Blakely leaned forward, a self-satisfied smile creeping about the corners of his mouth. The great universal truth which he had tried to expound to his family several weeks before was about to see light in a practical demonstration.

"Tell me, my dear child," he said benevolently. "Tell me and your—skeptical mother why you now respect Chester and wish him at your party?"

Margie raised her head, her eyes alight with a great happiness.

"Oh, papa," she said simply, "Chester can spit farther than Eddie!"

The Twentieth Tree

A Novelette

by Viola Ransom Wood

OLD JOHN PAULL, THE POTATO KING, HAD AN UP-TO-DATE DAUGHTER WHO DID NOT WANT A FISH FOR A HUSBAND. JOHN COULD NOT SEE FORDIER, THE MAN WHO KNEW HISTORY AND LOVED TREES. . . . . .

A BOX of charcoal tablets in one hand, and pounding the arm of his chair with the other, John Paull, president of the Paull Potato Corporation, was "laying down the law."

That was one of John Paull's trade tricks. It was his oft-repeated boast that he had earned his title of "Potato King" through this knowing of how to tell others "where to head in," and seeing to it that they kept to the designated path.

Commercially speaking, the results *were* obedience and harmony—but *en famille!* That was quite another story. He had found that one pair of feet especially, were showing troublesome tendencies to kick up a little dust of their own choosing. The owner of these feet was the party of the second part to this evening's lively session.

Since Peggy Paull's return from college, and Wayne Fordier's coming to Stockton, these clashes had followed the Paull dinners with the regularity of the pellets of sweetened charcoal—for if Fordier didn't drop in, and with his presence and irritating prophecies cloud the end of a perfect day for the Paull paterfamilias, why the telephone was sure to ring, interrupting Andrew Belden's tête-à-tête with Peggy.

That phone had spoiled more than one thrilling sea yarn for Peggy's father!

Rattling the tablets like shot in a tea caddy, his book of sea stories still open on his knee, old Paull was pleading hypocritically with his daughter to not tempt him to do murder.

"I've no wish to, Peggy," he professed by way of a dramatic "clincher." "But, by the soul of Lafitte——"

"Oh, father, don't start *that,*" impatiently begged the party of the second part—a wisp of a girl, with the retroussé nose and pointed chin of the Irish, and the battle glint of shamrock ancestors in her eyes.

"Start it," said the other, with

a biff-bam and rattle. "I won't be starting it. I'll be finishing it—if that history-spouting schoolmaster——"

Hibernian blue eyes challenged those of Hibernian blue that glared beneath bushy brows of gray.

"What's shameful about teaching history and languages in a high school?" the challenger wanted to be told.

"Shameful!" the other roared in reply, waving both hands high above his head, as though beseeching Heaven to come to his aid in showing contempt for school-teaching as a masculine occupation. "Shameful! *You* ask *me* what is shameful! *You* ask *me that!*" Emphasis on the pronouns left him somewhat short of breath, but seemed to relieve the gauge of emotions. Sitting a trifle calmer in his chair, he panted expressively, "High school or low school, it isn't a man's business. You'd see Andy Belden doing a woman's job like that! See him abc-ing history or Russian, or Latin, or Spanish into a lot of kids' heads!"

"For the very good reason, he couldn't," flared Peggy stanchly, the light of bellicosity still in her glance. "*He* can't even talk English properly."

"He can talk the work out of the hands, though," grunted the Potato King becoming sufficiently calm mentally to register the fact he had eaten two pieces of pie for dinner. Stopping long enough to pop one of the black squares into his mouth, and drop the box into a side pocket of his pepper-and-salt suit, he continued complacently:

"And he's the kind of a man for me! His idea of history and the like is mine. He says he thought them so important, that he learned what he had to learn in school, for the purpose of forgetting them as soon as possible."

"He has accomplished it—no mistake!" Her voice held all the supercilious contempt of one but lately a-wing from the "finishing cocoon." "A few evenings ago, when Mr. Fordier mentioned the debt history owed to carpenters, and among others cited Christ and James W. Marshall, why Mr. Belden said that for his part, he thought that Marshall had been 'very small potatoes, like the big majority of vice presidents!'"

"And, for my part," her father announced, giving this a hollow laugh of scorn, but seizing upon the apropos words as an introductory wedge for further expression of ingrained sentiments, "*I* don't propose to have a son-in-law in my family, who can only talk dead history and dead languages. Or rant about what's going to happen a century or so in the future. I don't want any Jules Vernes, or Mother Shiptons. I mean to have a son who is alive to *to-day!* Who'll be a dependable prop to me in my old age. One that'll be capable of going out there in my potato fields and laying down the law as I would. One that'll have business sense enough to see to it that the Yellow-birds don't fly the Pacific with too big a percentage of the Paull Corporation profits."

His daughter was quick to grasp the apropos in an argument, also.

"There," she caught him up triumphantly. "There, father! You're admitting something that you fairly raise the roof in contradicting, when Mr. Fordier tries to tell you——"

"Don't Mister-Fordier me!" blared her father with a snort of disdain, his gray stubble of a mustache bristling belligerently. "I won't be Mister-Fordiered! And, I warn you, Peggy," he concluded in his best dictatorial form, "if that red-headed, history-logged fool calls up this night, I'll have something to say to him that he may not like to hear."

"And *I*," put in his daughter arrestingly, walking toward the library door, her words as crisp as the rustle of the blue taffeta she was wearing, "will have something to say to your friend, Mr. Belden, that he may not care to hear.

But," she said, shrugging her shoulders and smoothing an imaginary crush from her abbreviated skirt, "I'd as soon tell him now as a week from now. Of course, it will spoil our theater party to-night—for he'll sulk. Still," she finished philosophically, raising modishly plucked eyebrows and throwing wide both hands in a careless gesture, "what's one theater party more or less?"

John Paull recognized the species of weed that had sprung up suddenly in his family garden. It was a dare. He gritted well-preserved teeth over a stubborn particle of charcoal, as he realized how powerless he was to cast the offender from the Paull pay roll. Many an independent-spirited employee of the corporation had received his "time" for a less show of "impudence." A daughter, however, isn't to be hired and fired like a "caterpillar" chauffeur; so, purplish of face the Potato King watched the unchastened rebel disappear, heard her voice—lifted in what sounded suspiciously like a taunting song of victory—as she mounted the broad, richly velveted stairway.

At this song, old John Paull bounded to his feet, kicked an obstructing hassock from the path, and strode about the solidly furnished, book-lined room, mentally wirelessing his life's greatest grievance to high Heaven:

"Girls, girls, girls!" he cried this disappointment. "To think that all of them had to be girls! Have husbands picked for them. The Lord knows how hard it was for me to get two son-in-laws. Two that had money, coupled with sense enough to make more. And now, when I'm trying to land one for *her,* she keeps him waiting a month for his answer. Acts like she's about half a notion to pick for herself. And him! A man whose head is so filled with book wisdom that he can't earn more than one twenty-five a month. I won't have it!"

However, as his thoughts raced along this line of bitter disapproval, they serpentined the fear that just such a sword of Damocles swung above the carefully laid plans, centering in the alliance of Peggy and his business manager, Andrew Belden.

John Paull realized he was up against the stubbornest proposition of a two-fisted career. Two-fisted, for he wasn't descended from a line of "Tuber Barons." He had first seen the light in a converted box car that served as the moving "palace" for his parents. His father had lived and died a section foreman, while he, the son, had risen through sheer ability to drive close bargains, and to dominate both men and situations. Job by job, share by share, carload by carload, acre by acre, leasee by leasee, he had climbed, until he was to-day the undisputed Potato King of America.

Yet, as his glance rested on the door through which his twenty-two-year-old daughter had gone, after flinging that tacit dare in his face, a feeling of helplessness descended on him. It seemed inutile to lay down the law further to her.

For a little, the weight of his years lay heavy on him. His step slowed. From the vantage of an old widowered man, he looked back over the intervening space of time, and visioned his wife, with Peggy in her arms, with Peggy clinging to her billowing skirts.

"The baby of the lot," he mused softly of these vanished days. "Left without her mother at two. Brought up by them that were hired. And, of course, the less they crossed her, the smoother their rows were to hoe. She's always had things just about her own way——"

Presently, though, his stride quickened. This softness of heart was again incrusted by the fighting armor that had raised him from a box car to a house with a half-dozen servants.

The pur of a smooth-functioning motor in the driveway leading from the street to the front of the house, caused

him, however, to cease his meditative pacings, and stand at the nearest window. Drawing aside the corded silk hangings, he peered into the settled dusk.

A portly figure alighted from the car and came leisurely toward the steps, pulling off gloves, adjusting coat and tie, in the manner of one who isn't quite unconscious of his dress suit, and who is, also, unaware of there being a looker-on observing him.

But John Paull's eyes were registering only approving recognition. The adumbrative outlines of the "favorite" he was backing, coming forward through the night, was like a shot of digitalis to the heart of fainting resolves.

"I won't stand for her making a mess of things," he avowed determinedly, hot breath fogging a circle on the window glass. "This is the age of money-making. Of hanging on to what you get. Fine talking died out with ancient Rome. Whether *he* can talk proper English or not, she'll have her money-maker, the same as Cissie and Mollie. Only a man like that," and his head inclined toward the faint sound of the bell, which was summoning Hicks to the door, "can make more, and protect all this," and his inner vision took in, not only the comforts and luxurious beauty of the room to which he was turning his back, but extended over the whole palatial residence, set in spacious grounds, then on to office buildings, and acre after acre of green, growing vines, that seemed to touch the outermost horizons of the San Joaquin Valley on the two sides of the Stockton Channel. "Danged if I'll leave what I've slaved and fought for—for an impractical schoolmaster to lose to the first mountebank who flashes some watered stock in his eyes!"

II.

In this day of ubiquitous jazz, of frank feminine revelations and consequent unwearied masculine imagination, there are still some Chinamen who cling to queues, some rubes betting on the pea being under the shell where it isn't; and, driving about in high-powered automobiles, are a few men who consider crimson dresses, rouged cheeks and lips, and generous displays of silken hosiery illuminated signposts along that alley, yclept Double Standard.

These last scorners of popular band wagons are the sort who want their sweethearts to wear opaque petticoats in Hollandish numbers, skirts of a length to do the "White Wings" out of honest jobs, and carry smelling salts instead of lipsticks. A daguerreotyped vision of some wasp-waisted fainting addict hovers like a mote in their eyes. They would mold the feminine world to that one old-fashioned pattern, if they could. Failing, they splash on the smut at every opportunity modernism offers.

Such a manner of man was Andrew Belden—moist of hands, magnet to the clincking offspring of the San Francisco mint, thirty-eight as to age, and missing "overweight" by a slight margin.

As to his mental horizons, his overseas record gives the best insight into that. His claim to one hundred per cent honors was spoiled by the two days he had been forced to spend in the guardhouse for writing to John Paull that the deepest impressions received thus far of "la belle France"—after ten months of mule-driving over there in the quartermaster corps—was the "sliminess of their mud, their undeviating system of short-changing, and the general immorality of their women."

Of course, these things were illegible smudges on the page of the letter that ultimately reached Paull, who was Belden's prewar employer as well as his present one. But even though it didn't get past the censor, and landed Belden in durance vile, it shows the slant of the writer's inner viewpoint. He took a provincial mind overseas with him—and brought it home, without its having con-

tracted so much as the chickenpox of "internationalism."

Peggy Paull was not ignorant of his opinions regarding colors, complexion and ankles. Such ignorance was an impossibility. Since her homecoming from college, the business manager of the Paull Potato Corporation had called unofficially with the regularity of the butcher's solicitor on Mrs. Simpson in the Paull kitchen. And, no one could act as an animated detectograph to so much of Andrew Belden's conversation without learning his views—adverse and commendatory—in wholesale quantities. Unless crossed—when he sulked—he was neither reticent nor shy. The Belden Board of Censorship was always sitting. Its findings were seldom kept in secret archives!

Yet, fully cognizant of his tastes, Peggy Paull had gone to considerable time and expense in securing the costume in which she came down fifteen minutes after his arrival.

With a smiling "Good evening, Mr. Belden," she stood framed in the library door, arrayed in garments that thrust themselves on her suitor's eyesight with all the unpleasantness of one of those unforgetable star-shells, when he was in front of a load of ammunition and behind a pair of mules, and while the heavens were alight as conspicuous as a cootie on a white collar.

This comparison embraced the box they were soon to occupy at the theater, and momentarily Belden wished he and his guests were to sit in some obscure back row.

Not that Peggy wasn't dressed according to the edicts of fashion. Her gown of scarlet satin was cut in the prevailing mode—which seems to prudish eyes to consist of as narrow a strip of fabric as possible between French heels and modestly concealed ears! Still, Belden's eyes, being atavistically mid-Victorian, his disapproval was as plain as an unmassaged wrinkle on the face of a giddy grandmother. He made all haste to reach the wrap Peggy was trailing negligently, wrong side out, in the wake of absurdly high heels, that added at least three teetering inches to her height, He proceeded to show similar alacrity in assisting her into it. Then, when its deceptive lavender lining was folded about her bare shoulders, it gave him a fresh slap in the face. It was, if anything, a shriek louder than the gown.

Belden gazed at this final ensemble he had helped to disclose, much as a teetotaler looks upon his favorite patent medicine, when some jarring soul has untactfully pointed out its true alcoholic content. He turned quickly toward her father, confidently expecting to hear an explosion of wrath, followed by a peremptory order for an immediate change of raiment. But the beaming good humor on the old man's face, killed this hope.

Belden's jowls sagged; he forthwith lapsed into a sulk.

"Fatuous old fool," was his thought of his prospective father-in-law. "Peggy needs a *man* to take her in hand. Well, just wait." He chewed the pleasurable cud of how *he'd* do some laying down of domestic law!

But John Paull was far from being a fatuous fool. He was merely a father who had raised three motherless daughters through the last twenty-six years of Dye Trust orgies of invention. To such a man, the colors of the prismatic spectrum can no longer present combinations that are startling. His eyes had beheld about every shade and color that had run the gamut of fashiondom. So, when he looked at his daughter, he noted only that she had on "another" new dress.

This fact furnished a glow of pleasure. The thought came to mind at once that the "outfit" would likely cost him "a pretty penny." He wished the redheaded schoolmaster could see the bills! Just to show him what Peggy could do to a half year's salary—at one bite!

Their possible size, however, didn't trouble him. Peggy, to his eyes, looked "nice"—which was both sufficient and as it should be. A king's daughter must dress in a manner befitting the position of a princess.

Possibly, this "nice" verdict was biased by the fact that Peggy's piquant face was radiant with smiles—indicating that peace was again restored in the house of Paull.

And the girl *was* youthful enthusiasm incarnate, for she guessed how nearly she came to representing a "flaming brand" to Belden, and shrewdly kept up a rapid-fire of laughing chatter, ignoring and shielding his sulky silence from the ken of her father. The purpose? Simply that she hadn't as yet received the set value out of the costume. Its assembling had cost her two precious days of the last trip to San Francisco, for evening gowns and wraps of this caliber aren't kept in stock by every shopkeeper. Only the strongest positives in beauty dare wear such a constant challenge to the negative eyes of every beholder. Gowns that give the wearer's charms a moment's respite now and then, constitute the most popular models, and make for the quickest and surest trade turnovers.

Perversely intent upon getting full compensation for the gayeties this shopping had lost her, as well as interest on past scores against her escort, Peggy merrily rushed the departure.

With the echo of her vivacity in his ears, her father went from the door, where he had received a butterfly breath of a kiss on the cheek, and drew a volume of Morgan Robertson from the shelf, retrieved the hassock, and sat down heavily in his chair.

"Thank God," he sighed devoutly, stretching his legs and leaning back in comfort. "The rest of this day's fighting can be got from a book."

Enjoyment was now his for leisurely seeking on the printed page. Contentment surrounded him. The big house was quiet. The servants were about their duties, and out of sight and sound. The street noises did not intrude discordantly. No one would disturb him, and temporarily his parental worries were at rest. For one evening, at least, Belden had a clear field. Fordier couldn't telephone the theater—and he wasn't a member of the box party.

An easy mind and a man's kind of a story! Heigho!

Could he have listened in on what Peggy and Belden were saying at that minute, however, the taste of the salt spray from the quarter-deck, the whizzing of a marlinespike past his ears, would have been utterly spoiled for him, and the "night cap" which the unobtrusive Hicks later fetched in, would have been drunk with all the apparent delight of a cup of gall and wormwood.

III.

It was Belden's managerial ability that first singled him out as a possible son-in-law.

John Paull intended that the three daughters should share equally in the estate, come that inevitable last summons. Sentiment, though—for the Potato King loved the organization he had conceived and perfected—made him seek some plan whereby the Paull Potato Corporation might be entailed. He felt that neither Cissie's husband, vice president and stockholder in the largest bank at Sacramento, nor Mollie's, owner and active manager of the Yosemite-San Francisco Autobus Line, would care to change residence to Stockton, that their fingers might be kept constantly on the pulse of the potato market.

Therefore, Belden, eligible bachelor—business manager and a shareholder and director in the corporation—was the logical choice. It was gratifying to have him become a willing though unconscious accomplice to this scheme, immediately following Peggy's return from

boarding school at Mills—where she had changed from an unimportant child, known locally as the "youngest Paull kid" to a very attractive and marriageable young lady.

Up to his second meeting with Wayne Fordier in the Paull drawing-room, Belden had flattered himself that he had been picked by Fortune for the sinecure of third "in-law." He entertained many roseate visions, and until Peggy astonished him somewhat by refusing to give his proposal an immediate answer, the crystal of the future was unclouded. Now, however, it was frequently run with pictures from a rival scenario. A certain red-headed combination of athlete, scholar, and gentleman walked in and out of the scenes in such a way as to shatter as many Belden bubbles of opulence as John Paull's piratical tales.

Not that he, Belden, hadn't tried to tell the disturber of his peace "where to head in." He had—but only to find the process about as effective as shooting poisoned arrows at the Sphinx. For, after he'd shot the worst of his darts, and watched them fall blunted at his feet, or had his aim deflected by the laughter-flecked brown eyes which refused to be read, Belden, the infallible manager of yellow men and hirelings, would usually drive away from the Paull mansion in a furious pout.

Still Peggy liked Belden in a way. He might lack polish—such as many generations of gentlemen and gentlewomen had given Fordier—but so did her father lack it, and Peggy's "smart" education hadn't made her snobbish. She didn't have the idea that the diamond in the rough wasn't a diamond for all that. Then too, in many ways Belden resembled her father. He was strong of character—set, in fact. He was without glaring bad habits, though it was whispered about that he had been jilted twice—the last occasion ruthlessly enough to cause him to seek surcease in timely military service. Then, too, he was successful. Was no small figure in and about Stockton—something of a large toad in a small puddle.

But Peggy also had to consider the fact that he was sulky as to disposition, and to get his way, he would ride roughshod over the finer sensibilities of others. His way was the right way always. What he wanted, he went after as a troglodyte after its mate.

He was neither a psychoanalyst nor diplomat, and never less of either than this evening, when a jazzy little "roadbug" cut in ahead of his patent-leathery Stutz at one of the intersections of South Main Street.

Peggy leaned forward—a dart of flame from the background of black upholstery—to wave a vivacious hand in response to the driver's friendly hail in passing.

When they were inhaling the small car's exhaust, she observed to her companion:

"Improves his old boat a hundred per cent, doesn't it?

> "'A little dash of varnish,
> A bright new coat of paint,
> Can make a worn-out Lizzie
> Look something what she ain't.'"

she paraphrased with a gay laugh. "That's what I told Mr. Fordier when he bought that old second-hand thing from Mott. And *I* selected the colors for the new coat, if you please!"

Belden had remained remotely silent since they left the Paull library—but this flash got an answer from Mars!

"That's what that paint makes you look like to-night," he opined bluntly. *"Something that I hope you ain't."* Blundering ahead, without sense or understanding, he added the gratuitous advice: "You'd better scrub some of it off before we get there, and the others see you. They'll see ***enough*** without that!"

Peggy meekly took the handkerchief he thrust toward her, but displayed no haste about using it to wipe off the of-

fending rouge. The imp that had stood at her shoulder while she was searching out this costume, was doing a tango of glee. This was not the first time Belden had criticized her clothes—but she intended that it should be the last! This was to be his lesson—this "eyeful" of all that he most cordially hated. It was to show him that she would wear what she jolly well pleased. He would have nothing to say about it.

"There's something else, then, that you don't like about my looks," she suggested in deceptive humility.

Belden bit.

"You can bet there is," he stated, showing that while he was clothed in the habiliments of a gentleman, he had left the gentleman's art of lying gracefully to a lady when the subject of her personal appearance comes up—left it at home—providing he ever possessed it! "You look so much like a fast woman, in that get-up, that honest to God, I'm almost ashamed to take you into that box to-night. Even if the others are our friends, they'll pan you plenty to your back. To say nothing of how everybody else in the house will talk. Everybody knows you by sight. They'll make it the talk of the San Joaquin Valley that old Paull's girl got to be a high-stepper while she was away at school."

"You're not very complimentary to-night, Mr. Belden."

"How could I be about that!" and he touched a moist, hot hand gingerly to the sleeve of her Carmen wrap. Then to make a thorough job of his tactlessness, he suggested, "We're early. Let's go back, so as you can put on something decent. Something that has more cloth to it, and will look more like a dress and less like a one-piece bathing suit! You won't need but a few minutes to make the change. That'll get us back down here in time for the first act."

"Very well," she acquiesced meekly. "Turn around, and drive back if you wish, Mr. Belden. But," she confided solicitously, "I wouldn't advise you to come in to talk with father. He *would* eat pie for dinner to-night. And you know what his dyspepsia can be."

"That's the stuff!" he approved both complacently and familiarly. "I won't take a chance with the old man. I'll just wait out in the machine."

He signaled he was turning.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," she demurred, voice still deceptively honeyed.

"Why not?"

"Father wouldn't care to have the night watchman see you sitting at our front steps *all night!*"

Too late he saw the trap. They were on the car track, but he jammed the brakes and stopped.

"Good Lord, Peggy, be reasonable."

"I'm always reasonable, Mr. Belden."

"Then you will change——"

"My mind about going to the show with *you*—yes! I wouldn't even let my father choose the clothes I am to wear, Mr. Belden. That is a prerogative I consider strictly my own."

The traffic cop commanded attention.

Stockton, like most San Joaquin Valley towns, is aswarm with farmers' automobiles on Sunday nights; and this was the busiest corner. The jam of noisy traffic was all but treading the officer's toes.

"Well," he demanded, "what y'u going to do? Turn, or pass? You can't park here and argue it out. You got to keep moving *some* direction."

For answer, Belden shot the car ahead in the way it was pointed, drove around the block, back again onto the main street, and to the theater.

His one thought—that circled and circled like a restless horse about a stake—was "Wait! Just wait!"

IV.

Wayne Fordier spent a portion of his luncheon hour the following day at a telephone pay station near the Riverferry High School.

He had passed a wakeful night. A green-eyed monster and a girl in a scarlet dress had raised a squall in a normally placid pool.

At the theater, he couldn't keep his mind on the play. Peggy's gown outshone the spotlight. Her smiles at the animated dollar signs—as he labeled her small-town four-hundred companions—eclipsed the star's bright lines.

Fordier sat there, far back in the house, folding, unfolding, and carefully refolding his program into minute squares and triangles, and took inventory of his personal assets. The completed list ran something like this: youth, education, breeding—and a job; a second-hand automobile, a bagatelle income, a matured endowment insurance, an eight-hundred volume "Californiac" library, twenty acres of land in as many counties—and the trees. But compared with what her scarlet feathers, upholstered surroundings, and gold-plated companions stood for, the result just about frosted the hardiest of budding aspirations. Fordier told himself that it was all very well for mind to acknowledge matter; reason to bow occasionally to jealousy—but the zero-producing fact of full moneybags remained unchanged. And the worst of it was, they would keep right on being there—solid as a glacier.

Hours later, bathrobe over pajamas, he sat in the window of his room, smoking, thinking, blue. Then all at once, his conscious vision caught the faint outlines of the State asylum and the towering trees out at Oak Park. The two conjoined to switch a current of recklessness through him.

"I may be a fit subject for *that* place," he argued rebelliously, eyes again on the asylum's turrets, "but just the same, money or no money, I'm going to speak of my plans regarding the trees." On the night-dampened sill he pinched the fire from his cigarette. Unknotting the cord of his robe, he prepared at last to seek relaxation, if not repose, between sheets. "No one could construe that as playing for her money," was the concluding argument in justification of the resolve. "We all have certain inherent rights to castles in Spain."

Hence, the noontime call, asking for an engagement for late that afternoon.

In spite of the fact he could have put what he had to say on this subject into four tongues other than excellent English, this confidence had been hanging fire for more than three months. He trusted Peggy, was eager to confide in her—but while he could talk fluently and exhaustively on economics, politics, art, music—any general topic in fact—a French strain in him kept him tonguetied when it came to family affairs.

Not only in the matter of personal reticence, but in other ways, Fordier was as different from Belden as a yam from a plain "spud."

Even their service records bore this out.

Belden never let the opportunity pass to speak slightingly of those men who had worn white collars above the "crossed-quill" insignia. It made no difference that Fordier had been laisson officer many months of the time he was in Russia, under revolutionary conditions when everybody was apparently fighting everybody else, and where even some sworn allies of one's country were not above pinging a treacherous shot in the back, given opportunity. Belden sneered just the same.

He professed to thank God that he had "cussed mules in plain United States" over there where the *real stuff* took place. He didn't read other people's letters, and "slap them in the guardhouse for saying what was the honest truth." Nor did he "strut around in puttees and a Sam Browne belt, and act as mouthpiece for some little two-by-four officer."

But Fordier never openly lost temper over these slurs. The nearest he ever came to disputing a point was on the

occasion of that second meeting in the Paull drawing-room. Belden was unusually free with his criticisms before their host and hostess that evening, and climaxed his efforts to be offensive with a remark which made Peggy blush for his rudeness, and made old Paull eye him in momentary surprise, and think of how less had started a lively free-for-all on board many a sailing vessel!

Fordier, however, merely turned inscrutable eyes on the speaker.

"Nevertheless, Mr. Belden," he returned, smiling politely, and showing his confidence in the soundness of the planks in his service platform, "I'm glad I had the good fortune to serve when and where I did. In no other way could I have secured such a keen insight into the problems which confront the Pacific coast. I had opportunities of meeting those in power in the Orient and the Far East. I talked with some personally, and listened to many more. In that way, I learned true facts sufficient to hang that whole island empire with one rope!"

"And I," asserted Belden, a sneer in his tone, "would trust any of them that we've got out there in the potato fields, as I would the most educated white man I ever met."

That last insinuation wasn't unregistered, but Fordier smiled the polished, reserved smile of a gentleman who doesn't agree with what is being said, yet who has no intention of getting angry, pass the opprobrium of liar, or start a brush over the issue.

"Your privilege, Mr. Belden," he ceded smoothly, while the expression in his laughter-flecked eyes roiled the other as mirth affects a caged beast. "But," he went on to state with positiveness, "that doesn't alter the fact of a leopard being a leopard wherever he lives. No people can—as a race—talk one thing while at home, and say quite another when they're actively entrenching themselves abroad. That is, and at the same time, convince others that the motives are above suspicion. Truth isn't two-faced. I'll admit that they present a nice, clean, brotherly countenance here—but I've seen them without the mask!"

Belden's laughter was both rude and offensive by intent.

"Just the same," he scouted, turning to the elder man, "we'll keep on doing business with them, won't we, Mr. Paull? If they keep giving us big and sure profits?"

Old John Paull laughed thoroughly in sympathy with this turn of the argument, and nodded his head approvingly at his business manager.

"Business is business," he averred. "I raise potatoes for dollars——"

"And leave sentimental tommyrot to women—and others," interpolated Belden suggestively.

Fordier brushed this insinuation lightly to one side also, and addressed his host direct.

"Just the same, Mr. Paull," he observed, shaking his head forbodingly, "I fear the day is coming when I shall be glad my father isn't here to see what has happened to California. He loved this State as few have ever loved her. And unless the people awaken to the true import of what an eighty-eight yellow birthrate is compared to an eighteen of whites to a thousand, our future history——"

"There you go to historying again," peeved old Paull, interrupting impatiently.

Fordier blushed as thoroughly as a fair-skinned young man can blush, and apologized, concluding in laughing chagrin:

"Teaching seems to be having a nullifying effect on my manners."

"Why don't you get a real job?" the elder man demanded a little irascibly. This airy imperturbability of one, who should, by all rules of impetuous youth, be fighting mad, was getting on the Potato King's nerves.

But Fordier remained outwardly as serene as a smiling spring day.

"We aren't all so well equipped by nature as you, Mr. Paull," he blarneyed in return for the knock. "We haven't your commercial aptitude, nor your keen acumen for business organization." Then in a more personal vein, he went on to confide his reasons for choosing the profession of teacher, "I seem to have been given the 'gift of tongues' in a way. Also, a penchant for history—which is but natural! And I have always thought it best that one follow the bent of his especial twig."

"You mean to say that you aim to teach school all your life?" flouted the old man, fidgeting. His eyes were roaming about the formal room. He was impatient for an excuse to get into his comfortable chair in "a man's part of the house."

"Oh, that depends," was the indefinite, unruffled reply. "Of course," he added more specifically after a moment of deep silence, wherein pitying disapproval was to be seen on the faces of all three, who with him, were grouped conversationally near the opened grand piano, "I expect to mount a little higher than my present station. I'm only twenty-six, so you see, Mr. Paull, time doesn't exactly press."

"I found it paid to put in my best licks when I was young and full of spunk," rasped the old man squelchingly.

It didn't have that effect, however.

"Oh," explained the other, "after a few years' more of experience—apprenticeship, as it were—a chair in some university," he shrugged airily. "Quién sabe? Who can say?" Then he confided with a dreamy smile, "Of course, I plan to write some more books——"

This was the final proof of "unseaworthiness" to John Paull. He bounded to his feet, exasperated.

"Peggy," he ordered shortly, "play some music for him." He was minded to say, "Before I'm tempted to kick him," but implying with his next words, a far more hospitable reason for excusing himself. "Andy, come! Let's go in yonder. See what can be done with that Oshida highwayman! He's wanting a quarter of a cent more for his crew of diggers, is he?—the thief!"

This was on the occasion of the second evening Wayne Fordier had dropped in. Such a finale would never have been spoken now, had Oshida been demanding a prima donna royalty on every sack of "spuds" dug on the channel islands!

Not that the young professor hadn't proving himself deserving of the highest respect. He had, and more. He was likable.

The boys at the Riverferry High School swore by him as a "jolly good sport." But this popularity, it must be confessed, lay to a great degree to the fact he did not use their report cards in keeping the scores of their athletics, and didn't let his personal participation in their games stop with being an occasional "bum umpire" as had previously been the sad and unpopular way of instructors. Professor Fordier could "swing a wicked bat," they would tell you.

And the girls? "Oh, isn't he just swell!"

In securing this unanimous feminine opinion, is where Fordier showed the makings of a first-rate psychologist. It was his first school, but he steered safely from the shoals that propinquity between flapper, near-flapper, and a good-looking —though red-headed!—bachelor set in his course. Before the first school hop he listed the four classes alphabetically, beginning with seniors, conforming religiously to standards of class precedence —and danced then, and since, only in strict accordance with this schedule. What seasoned diplomat could have arranged court functions any better?

He also had the reputation of being fair. Fair in sports, fair in meting out reprimands, fair in his expectations of those immature minds under him. And

as a teacher is thought of by his pupils, so is his reputation in their homes. It doesn't take many enthusiastic homes to color the opinions of the countryside. Consequently in the few months he had been in San Joaquin County, Fordier had won for himself the universal welcoming hand in and about Stockton.

Old John Paull knew all this, and acknowledged it for what it was worth in his eyes: *Being a fine fellow didn't put money in empty pockets!*

Money! Money! That was the standard by which he meant to measure his third son-in-law.

Belden rode in a smooth-purring Stutz when he went about *his* work of keeping the Orientals up to snuff. No repainted, second-hand Lizzies for him! Belden could command a real salary—why, he paid his stenographer as much as the schoolmaster was getting! Belden knew how to drive a bargain. He was eager to get ahead. No grass grew under his feet, because he was young! Belden knew how to drive men to get the utmost dollar out of them. He didn't piddle along teaching children how to kick a ball! You couldn't take Belden "in" because he was alive to to-day, alert to what was going on in the realm of big business.

Therefore, Belden was the man for Peggy.

But say that last as forcibly as he would, John Paull couldn't make it sound convincing to his ears. The fact remained that Peggy wasn't either the plastic Cissie, nor the mercenary Mollie. She was a feminine, quick-witted, bull-headed John Paull! This made him do a lot of thinking and scheming when he might otherwise have been following Stevenson, John Masefield, or Morgan Robertson on the high seas—for if John Paull hadn't been born inland, and discovered the joys of seafaring literature late in life, he probably would have been shot ere this for filibustering, or at least have risen to the domineering position of mate on a whaler!

Give him a sea yarn, and he'd forget his dyspepsia. That was saying something, too, for one who was a chronic sufferer from injudicious eating of whatever Mrs. Simpson set before him.

The Potato King scorned finickiness as to food, as he did those who permitted themselves to be made capital of and hadn't the brains, or the ambition, to reach out and gather to themselves what they wanted.

V.

ENVELOPED in an apron, patently not designed for the use of a one-hundred-and-fifteen pounder, and with dough under sedulously manicured nails, Peggy Paull was still at the phone when her father came home from the office for luncheon.

He didn't enter showing the bright countenance of a summer sky, and the up-lilting "Good-by, Mr. Fordier," which greeted him at the library door, finished marshaling the storm clouds some public-spirited folks had aroused there a little while before.

A delegation of Native Sons had waited on him, unheralded, unwanted. And they had not minced words in telling him, as the head of the Paull Corporation, Limited, what they thought of his legal evasion of the Alien Land Law—a festering thorn which the red-headed professor had already given a few, faultlessly dictioned, prods! The delegates admitted that there were loopholes in the law—many of them, in fact—and that one of the number had been the means of the Paull Potato Corporation's crawling out of two attempted prosecutions. But, they a little more than intimated, they made it as strong as the scent of the animal they used in comparison, what opinion they held of the "skunk who would wiggle through such an unintentionally provided hole, and suck at the very life blood of his State."

"I have not sold them any land," John Paull had contended, standing firm in the truth, and within the law as it had been interpreted for him by one of the cleverest corporation attorneys in San Francisco.

"You've leased to them for terms of years, which amount to a bill of sale. You will not be alive fifty years from now. The land will be dead, too. Worked to death! They take all they can from it, and put nothing back."

"If my children, or my children's children get the profits, that's all that interests me! And if I choose to tie up my money in interest-bearing acres for fifty years, instead of interest-bearing bonds—that's my business. I absolutely refuse to be dictated to, when it comes to that!"

"It is such men as you, who are going to make the biggest blot on the fair pages of California's history," untactfully accused the orator of the delegation—and right then is when the meeting adjourned *sine die!*

Old John Paull had been a scrapper in his younger days, and even now was not the sort who called on his office staff to eject unwelcome visitors. Of course, this showed how greatly he was lacking in polish and suavity. No man rated in Dun and Bradstreet as millionaire, should yank the adjustable extension put in the mahogany desk for use of the boss' secretary when taking dictation—yank it out, and wield it as a menacing shillalah to rid himself of a bunch of delegates, no matter how earnest they be!

But that is just what the Potato King did. Then, after flinging the weapon after the head of the unlucky Native, whom pure chance caused to be the last one in getting down the stairs, the corporation's president read the riot act in the outer office. Another influx of pests such as that—he made it plain—let loose in *his* office, would see the ranks of the nation's unemployed augmented by just such and such a number! This number was exact enough to include every desk which was occupied; Belden, being absent on field inspection, alone missed the scorching.

Mollified to a certain extent, though with feathers still ruffled for anything that might come his way, the Potato King went home to luncheon.

"Tell my girl to come here," he greeted Hicks in the hallway, and nodding toward "a man's part of the house."

"Miss Peggy is telephoning in there now, sir," was the answer, given in a manner calculated to attract the least attention to the speaker. One glance at the bristling mustache, the bushy eyebrows that were all but meeting in a scowl was sufficient to make the Paull domestic corps court "the tall cat-tails" and avoid the boss's eye as much as possible till the storm blew over.

That was the expression which met Peggy, as she turned from the telephone, to rush back to the kitchen. She realized instantly how ill-timed had been those farewell words—for plainly another "session" was about to convene. It flashed through her mind that Belden may have had something to do with this.

"Suppose he has taken his sulks to father," she thought. "Well, if he has, it'll do him little good. What I wear is my business. I absolutely refuse to be dictated to about that." Which, had she known it, was but repeating her father's sentiments of a few minutes before.

Peggy knew the value of soft words, and she didn't deliberately court open differences with her father. Now she tried to dissolve the storm clouds with a bit of "pebble" speaking.

"Oh, hello, father!" she greeted, giving him a whirlwind hug, and an affectionate kiss. Then indicating the apron with a laughing curtsey, "You're just in time. I have been baking a batch of cookies. Your own kind—raisin filled!"

John Paull gave this a snort of derision.

"Sounded more to me like I was just

in time to catch you talking with that book-writing, ne'er-do-well again. And I want to tell you, right now, Peggy, I'm tired of it. I won't have it! It's getting so that a man can't have a quiet minute in his own house these days. If he tries to sit down to rest after a day's work, it's either fighting with his family, or hearing endless *we-weing*, and gab-gabbing of God knows what!"

"I'm trying to keep up in what French I learned up at Mills, father," Peggy said defensively.

"Well, by golly, if you keep *up* in it much longer, some day I'll just about scuttle the ship for the one that's helping you do the keeping up!"

As further argument along this line would spell disaster instead of calm, Peggy passed it over. She called attention once more to her apron, and the condition of her hands.

"There are just a few more of them to roll out, father, then we'll——"

"We'll sit right down, here and now, and settle this telephoning business," her father stated, ending the hope for immediate and peaceful adjournment. "I pay Mrs. Simpson to do that sort of work. And she can fill that apron a lot better than you can—and probably fill the cookies just as good, too."

When they were seated, Peggy occupying the penitential stool—the chair from which she had telephoned—and her father in his comfortable "seat of justice," he continued about the kitchen work:

"You can count yourself lucky, Peggy, that you've got a dad far-sighted enough to keep you from being tied to a cook stove the rest of your life. It takes more than a schoolmaster's salary to keep a Mrs. Simpson in the kitchen!"

"I like to cook. Domestic science was the one thing I really enjoyed——"

"Domestic fiddlesticks! Cooking three meals a day in a hot kitchen, is quite a different matter from baking an apple according to a thermometer, or making a batch of that fiery glue-stuff you pull off in a chafing dish now and then."

"But, father, I really do like messing about in the kitchen," persisted Peggy in truth.

"Maybe so, maybe so," conceded her father, "but not cleaning up the mess afterward! Nor the monotony of it, day in and day out. Especially with two or three yelling kids underfoot. You can't tell me anything about that, that I don't know already, Peggy. Didn't I try it those first six months after your mother died? At the end of that time wasn't I near daffy over trying to think up something to cook for you young uns two days hand running, without slipping in Irish stew, or milk gravy?—the two things I could make and always depend on to be what I planned 'em to be."

Peggy shrugged her shoulders.

"That's quite a different matter, father. A man isn't supposed to have the instinct for cooking. Besides, times are different now, too. Consider the fact that I am a product of the modern days and ways—in cookery as in all things else. With all due genuflections, let's forget the ancient history——"

Slang's ambiguity in this instance was unfortunate for the furtherance of peace.

"History! History!" cried her father, banging his fists resoundingly on the arms of his chair. "Can't I get a minute's rest from the word? Didn't I come home after running a bunch of that ilk out of my office? Faugh! The whole lot of them make me sick!"

"Who was in your office *this* time?" queried Peggy, her accent betraying the fact that all reports emanating from the Paull Corporation's offices had not been according to The Hague. She was curious to hear who besides Fordier, and possibly Belden, were responsible for this family typhoon.

"Another bunch about that Alien Land foolishness," sputtered John

Paull, screwing his lips into lines of distaste. "They give me a pain! They had this 'fair State' of theirs that they're forever raving about. Their dads staked it out, and patented it for them. The children, though, have been too danged shiftless to hang onto it. They're too big-notioned to farm it by the acre. Nothing short of thousand-acre ranches are big enough for them to lay flat on their backs in the shade and dream-farm! And now, when foreigners came in, grab up a few acres of the idle land, make it yield big crops, these Natives set up a dog-in-the-manger howl! 'Intensive farming is killing the soil,' they cry! Bah! A fine lot they are! I'd as soon have a rice-eater—by golly, if I wouldn't—as one of *them* in my family! And the sooner you tell that history-spouter you won't have him, the better pleased I'll be!"

Peggy's face flushed. This shot hit a hidden mark. It hurt worse than her father suspected. The day of leisurely courtships went into the discard along with leg-o'-mutton sleeves. Engagements no longer bloom on the century plants of love. If Belden had gone through these past three months, without declaring himself, Peggy would have put it down as "some more of his old-fashioned notions." Fordier, however, could play the ukulele and dance the latest toddles as well as the balance of the younger set, but conjugation of the word in five languages seemed to be all that he knew about expressing love.

He had taken her to dances in his little car; they had driven into the country several evenings—to Modesto, to the hills—yet, in spite of ample opportunity for "spooning" he had consistently treated her as a good pal. He hadn't so much as attempted a good-night kiss!

Peggy, thoroughly modern, and familiar with customs prevailing among her contemporaries, was more and more puzzled as the days sped by. When he had phoned just now, asking her to go for a ride late that afternoon—that he had something to tell her—she wondered thrillingly if the expected could be coming at last!

Her father's blundering into this condition of piqueing uncertainty hurt—and because it hurt—angered her.

"Perhaps, it would be as well to wait until he asked me to have him," she retorted bitterly, her eyes very bright, and a little stubborn twist to her lips.

John Paull fairly bounced in his chair. His Irish blue eyes blinked startled, unbelieving.

"There!" he exclaimed. "There! Isn't that just the type of them, though! Stand-backers! Do nothing to win the prize they've got their eye on!" he pointed out in deriding exultation, ignoring the fact he was dangerously close to straddling the fence. "Talk! talk! talk! Hang back till the last dog is hung! Look on while the other fellow digs in and puts in his best licks to win the girl! That's *their* style, all right!"

"You're talking as though you'd——"

The old man waved the words aside.

"Bah! He's probably waiting for leap year to come again!"

"Father!" Peggy jumped to her feet and angrily started for the door.

"A man who'll stand by and watch another fellow walk off with his girl! Bah! A baby could pick his pocket! He's the kind who'd be so careful of money that he'd use a thousand-dollar bond—if he had one, which he'll never have!—use it for a book mark. Then forget what book he put it in, and loan or lose it! It's a good thing for you, Peggy," he concluded, getting up and following her, "that I know men. Real men—when I meet them. I'm going to send Andy to San Francisco in a day or two, and I'm going to tell him that while he's up there for him to pick out the biggest sparkler he can get for the engagement ring. That we'll have the wedding along about New Year's."

Peggy turned back defiantly.

"Father, I won't be driven into marriage this way!"

But the ultimatum stood. The law had been laid down, finally, definitely, and John Paull had nothing further to say on the subject. Action alone must follow. To the soft-footed Hicks, who had made a discreet appearance in their path, he interrogated: "Well?"

"Luncheon is served, sir," was the hastily spoken answer.

"That being the case, come on, Peggy. Let's see how the cookies turned out."

Peggy obeyed. She realized that further argument was useless. She recognized the ultimatum for what it was. Drifting midstream was over. From now on she must either swim, or be swept along by the force of this strong current. The question repeated itself over and over, "On what shore will I land? On what shore?"

VI.

MUNCHING charcoal with all the abandon of a Filipino chewing betel nut, John Paull went back to the office after luncheon, so his feelings weren't razzed by the sight of Peggy stepping into the jazzy little "road bug" along about four o'clock.

The tilt with her father was sufficient to send a surge of last night's perversity through her. Fordier had never ventured a criticism of her style of dress, but she meant it would not be from lack of provocation this afternoon. If what had been selected to put the finishing touches to Belden's lesson, didn't produce a tidal wave on the quiet shore, then the ark of their friendship would weather any flood of fashion.

That you may guess at the high tension possibilities of the costume, it was advertised in the fashionable Grant Avenue store as "The Flames of the Field." It didn't belie its title, either. From the sport shoes of black and red leather, and prodigally displayed hose of red—Dame Fashion's *dernier cri* in smartness across the water—to the meadowbrook hat that looked like an inverted chalice of a full-blown poppy on her bobbed hair, Peggy was a figure to command as much attention as a bow-legged band leader.

Fordier took the full force of it, however, without a blink or a gasp. His glance was more than cursory, but was neither rude nor taken unknownly. Conscious that he had looked her over, his expression of Oriental inscrutability —which told her absolutely nothing— piqued her. Before they had gone a half block, she questioned directly:

"Well, Mr. Fordier, what do you think of it?"

The laughter-flecked brown eyes met the provocative challenge given by those of Irish blue, but the owner of the brown was quite equal to the occasion.

"Must I admit the complex inadequacy of my thoughts, Miss Paull?"

She was unable to resist his infectious gayety. Nevertheless, she was determined to provoke an argument, and deliberately probed to discover if compliment, or politely concealed disapproval, lay at the root of his reply.

"As bad as that," she inquired reproachfully.

"Bad? No, no!" he denied quickly. "I said complex."

"But that sounds bad," she insisted lightly. "So there's nothing left for me to do, is there, but demand a full explanation?"

The young man gave her a side glance of welling good humor.

"Since you insist! But we'll pass over the first impression," he complimented, displaying natural aptitude for playing the demanded part of courtier. "Your mirror has already told you that. No mere words can add perfection to an already perfect miniature."

This was one of his chiefest charms for Peggy; facility of speech coupled with picturesqueness of expression. His compliments were never hackneyed. His

conversation abounded with vivid word-pictures, which gave fresh twists to the commonplace things of everyday, or opened up new worlds that she sometimes thrilled to explore.

A hint of deviltry ran teasingly through his next words, however, after she had made a laughing deprecation to the compliment.

"Tell me, Miss Paull," he asked, the brown flecks dancing riotously, "what has been wielding such radical influences over your mind since Saturday?"

"Nothing that I know about," she returned a little awkwardly and uneasily. "What makes you ask?"

"Because," he answered enigmatically, the glints of humor still decidedly in evidence, "for three months your setting has been neutral. White, pale, pastel shades, or soft tones of autumn's gold and brown, and once a tailored suit of deep navy blue. Now suddenly—bolshevism!"

Peggy met this with an uncertain laugh. Her desire for an argument seemed in a fair way to see fruition—and strangely for a moment she wasn't exactly keen over the prospect. However, she usually finished what she started.

Her voice was honey-sweet as she inquired: "You think, then, that I have gone over to the 'Reds?'"

"Heaven forbid," he disclaimed earnestly, yet with an insuppressible grin, "that *I* should accuse a friend of having a mind as narrow as an Asiatic street!"

The grin developed into laughter in which she also joined.

"What influences would you say, then," she asked a moment later, "had been working detrimentally——"

"Now, now, Miss Paull!" he protested. "That's misquoting me again. I said 'radical,' did I not?"

"Radical, then," she corrected amiably. "What radical influences have been playing havoc with me, in your estimation?"

The young man gave a laughing gesture of defeat,

"To forestall further misinterpretations, I not only accede—but I *demand* that my explanations be heard! There are many possible answers, Miss Paull. Perhaps, rankling anger against some person or influence. Possibly, you went to see 'Carmen' when you were in the city last week. Neither? Well," he confessed with the quick smile of the undaunted, "whatever the cause, it called out the artistic talents of some one. No one but an artist could have designed both this costume, and the one that you wore last evening."

Despairing of flaws in this skillful weaving, Peggy segregated the last thread introduced, and held it up for critical inspection.

"You were at the theater, then?" she questioned.

"Would you have me miss such a treat? Even though you did refuse my invitation," he bantered in reply.

Peggy, however, didn't rise to meet this expression of gayety halfway. Her moods were as changeable as the streets they were traversing—streets that were patches of light and shade from the stately old trees which lined the way. She had been out in the light, but now she stopped for a space in the shadow of last night's quarrel with Belden, and today's tilt with her father, combining the two, and going back to her resolve to "get a rise out of" this unavowed suitor.

"Then you—did you think my gown daring?" She put it bluntly. "In other words, did I appear to your eyes like a vamp, Mr. Fordier?"

Laughter was blotted instantly from his face.

"Miss Paull!" In his agitation, he almost ran down a man with a wheelbarrow load of bricks.

"Oh, that was *one* opinion I had first-hand of it, I assure you," she said when they had passed out of range of the pedestrian's volley of profanity.

Fordier's mouth straightened expressively. He faced her, seeking confirmation of the words. Seeing that she wasn't jesting outrageously, his eyes narrowed, and askance, she could see the tightening of the muscles of his clean-shaven cheeks.

Plainly he couldn't trust his tongue for a minute or so. But a child on the street, presently gave him aid. He used her to impress the depth of his personal views.

"Look there, Miss Paull," he directed, slowing the car, and gesturing toward the little girl of seven or eight, dressed in ruffled sheer red organdie, which showed her knees, bare and sunburned between the tiny half-hose and the bottoms of her lace-trimmed, white knickerbockers. "That's a composite of the elements of my opinion."

Peggy looked. Puzzled by the unexpected comparison, she turned to him mutely for explanation.

"You wouldn't call that extreme, would you?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly not," she answered unhesitatingly.

"Why?"

"Why, because——" She stopped. She couldn't readily explain why such an interpretation would be absurd.

He put it into words for her.

"Because the clothes of innocence can never be called extreme or daring. That," he assured, advancing the spark again, "answers your question, I believe."

Peggy was accustomed to compliments of the medium current in her set. She expected them. They were a pretty girl's due. And, she accepted them with the same gay thanks with which she acknowledged flowers, or candy, or phonograph records. This though was a coin of unusual denomination. It left her speechless and blushing. She felt a little humbled, as though her conscience had rubbed a suspicion of stain off the scarlet she had flaunted.

"You don't realize, I know, how beautiful you can be at times," he continued in the same strain. He was conscious that speech was becoming suspiciously like a high-powered machine, set running when it ought to be kept quiet, but the fascination of its revolutions made him reckless as to consequences for a while. "Beauty, Miss Paull, can intoxicate, just as music intoxicates the senses. And, as I looked at you, from far back in the theater last night, I thought what a blessing it was—for you—that all persons were not attuned in spirit to this intoxication. Man is so created that few can admire to such a degree without being dominated by the desire of possession. I would hate," he finished, a little breathless, the revolutions slowing, the machine approaching control again, "to think of you—of all persons—living in a world of heartaches, you knew you had inflicted—and yet, were powerless to prevent."

Static had drawn his listener into the danger zone for the time, also, and while the whir of quickened senses was dying down to normal hum, both minds were fields of intensive thoughts.

They were near the city limits when Peggy finally broke the silence to own up: "You make me ashamed, Mr. Fordier."

"*I* make you ashamed?" he repeated, astonished.

"Yes." She told him what lay back of the dress "bolshevism." "The motive being what it was," she concluded, obviously shamefaced, "I undoubtedly deserved every criticism that was made."

"That is where I differ with you," Fordier asserted with quiet positiveness.

Her glance questioned the underlying reason for this.

"Some persons presume greatly," was the way in which he explained it. "The possession of a few surplus dollars, buys—so they believe—the right to criticize the world and its inhabitants. They fail to remember, that one can put crys-

tal-pure water into goblets of any shape or color, and still have crystal-pure water."

Suddenly he grinned, and Peggy had a glimpse of the dancing laughter lights in his eyes.

"To show you what *I* think of your dresses—both of them," he remarked with a boyish chuckle, "I wish Rossita was here to see you! You'd certainly get a full measure of appreciation from her. It takes an artist to appreciate art."

"Rossita?" repeated Peggy vaguely. "Who is Rossita?"

"A very pretty and popular girl, Miss Paull. I shall have to tell you about her some day," he added carelessly, his mind just then most intent on the resolve born on the dew-drenched window sill. "See that tree out there?" he asked in the next breath. He pointed across a neglected field to a large cottonwood tree, near the bank of the tule-shallowed stream, called Mormon Channel, which threads a meandering course through the outskirts of Old Stockton, where houses are now located colony-distances apart. "Rossita lived there once," he informed when Peggy gave it her attention. "And, I wish she were there now, that you might see her dance. Report has it, she could dance her way even into the hearts of angels."

"How interesting," lied Peggy, the same quality of honesty in her voice as had wrought discomfiture in Belden the previous evening. "You certainly ***must*** tell me *all* about her—*some day!*"

Too engrossed with his own critical thoughts to analyze nuances of tones, he missed in her "some day" that quality heard thousands of times daily in this English-speaking world, when acquaintances, chance-met, pass the invitation to call—which they hope will never be taken advantage of! That "some day" is one of the greatest little prevaricators in our language.

"Agreed," he returned enthusiastically. Then with an apologetic grin: "I take it for granted you won't mind a few bumps."

They turned off the highway, and started toward the lone tree.

"I want to tell you what I plan to do out here, as soon as I can locate some of those 'idle men' one reads much about these days, and find—when one tries to get in touch with them—that they are as elusive as humming birds. As you can see," he further apologized, as bump, bump, bump, the little car jounced on its way, "the first thing I'll have to do is to build a graveled roadway across here."

"You'll have to?" Peggy questioned curiously, gripping the side of the seat with one hand, and anchoring the upturned chalice of the poppy onto her head with the other, and momentarily losing sight of the image of the pretty dancer, who had made a decidedly unexpected début on the stage.

"Yes," Fordier replied laughing; both the word and laughter were "keyed up" appreciably with nervous excitement. He stopped the car under the shade of the mammoth tree. Taking off his cap, he announced with a flourish, "Permit me, Miss Paull, to introduce the Grosjean Cottonwood. It is one of my family of trees. Anybody can boast a family tree, but I claim a more unique distinction. I claim to possess the only original collection of a family of twenty trees—of which this is the youngest. At that, it isn't such a baby! It was wafting its flecks of cotton to the four winds of the San Joaquin Valley when Columbus was giving a covetous eye to a queen's jewels."

"Shall I say 'Charmed to meet you, Miss Grosjean,'—or is it Miss Cottonwood?" responded Peggy, seconding his whimsicality.

"Either will do, Miss Paull—just so long as you are really charmed. For," he concluded after a perceptible hesita-

tion, "it is this tree to which I referred over the phone."

VII.

His eyes caught and held hers intently, earnestly, for a moment. In the blue was a baffling expression of half-veiled disappointment, which he couldn't fathom. It wet-blanketed his enthusiasm a bit. The fact that he had committed himself so far, however, forced him to keep doggedly on.

"May I go into details, Miss Paull? Family affairs aren't exactly interesting to others, I know, but unless I touch upon my father's life, and work, and dreams, it would be impossible for me to give my own with anything like the clarity with which I wish to express them to you."

The disappointment disappeared. In its place came curiosity. There was eagerness even in her assurance. With this last to encourage speech, which was already becoming a thing difficult to command, he gave his confidence categorically, as far as this could be done, and still keep within the bounds of pride-limited resolves.

"My father, Miss Paull, was a dreamer as well as a Californiaphile. This State and her history were his life, almost. This tree, and the nineteen others, are the fruits of his dearest dreams. Have you read Anatole France?" he questioned, wishing to justify a seeming eccentricity of his father's by comparing it with similar ideas held by anotherother great man.

"A little," she answered vaguely in the manner of one whose fiction reading is generally taken as a drug to a bored mind, rather than a stimulant to memory.

Fordier had taught school long enough to interpret this vagueness correctly. Plainly a "quiz" on the great French novelist was not in order! So he passed it over tactfully:

"If you've chanced on his idea of placing benches for wayfarers, you'll understand father better, then. But father didn't 'go in' for placing benches. He specialized in plaques," he explained with a laugh which was threaded with affection.

"You mean memorial tablets, or something of that sort?" Peggy asked to fill in the pause.

"Yes. You see, he hated to think that any spot—even remotely associated with the history of pioneer California—should be destroyed or forgotten. These trees were to him living monuments to a dead and dying past. The plaques—they were to serve the same purpose as headstones in a cemetery. There is the oak tree near Le Grand, under which Frémont camped when the old Fort Millerton Road was being put through the San Joaquin Valley. That and its tablet and surrounding acre of ground, came to me. There is the Don Gaspar de Portola redwood in the Santa Clara hills. That with its plaque, and acre of land is mine. Another in the Santa Cruz mountains, near—but I won't bore you with specific details as to the locations. Enough that twenty such trees, twenty acres of land, and nineteen bronze plaques formed part of the estate which he left me. This tree alone represents a dream half-fulfilled."

He ran his fingers through his thick thatch of distinguishing red hair; looked up at the gray-green branches towering seventy feet or more above their heads. He was hesitant about saying more. The way would not be easy going. It would be beset with emotional pitfalls. It made him stop to question: Could he, as resolved, keep his castles in Spain outside of the shadows of those freezing, damning money bags?

Her question, in repetition of his last words, however, flagged him ahead with a sort of desperate courage.

"The plaque was ordered when he died," was the answer he gave with averted eyes. "I was in Vladivostok

when it happened. Some day I'm to put it up, but since I returned, I've never been able to bring myself to the point of doing it by myself."

Peggy nodded a sympathetic understanding of this. Had there been no recent acquaintance with a hazily pictured danseuse to float unwanted between thoughts, she would perhaps have been swayed by this emotion sufficiently to lay a commiserative hand for a moment on his rough tweed sleeve. Which, to him, would have interlocked wheels with the one chariot he wished to give a broad right of way!

"Then," he continued, "since coming here, I got to thinking it over, and made these other plans of my own. You see, Miss Paull, I some way feel differently about this old tree. It seems really mine. Its history is such that I can claim it without feeling I am selfishly taking for my individual use, what really belongs to all Californians. So, with this idea in mind, I have gone ahead and made arrangements to pass the ownership of the other nineteen variously located oaks, redwoods, pines, to those to whom they rightly belong—the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West. But this one, I'm retaining for myself. And, on the day on which my house is finished here," he concluded, his gaze studiously trained on the far hill-line horizon, "the day when I invite my friends to my house-warming, as it were, they will participate in a double rite. I will put up the plaque then. The cottonwood so intimately associated with the history of Stockton—and with Rossita—will live through the ages."

Peggy's mind, as she had listened with rapt attention to the story of the trees, was like a house whose many windows gave pleasing vistas of bright skies, gently swaying trees, and riant meadows—but shut went every blind at the mention of "she who danced."

A dissembling tongue, however, is a facile asset of a girl who orders her days and ways by society's yardstick. So Peggy jested blithely:

"That has a most serious look, Mr. Fordier."

Her companion rewarded her with a blush as complete as were her expectations. And while her heart grew cold as her thoughts flew to what seemed to be the side of the stream on which her landing was to be made, his beat with a furiousness that was upsetting to cold reasoning. He proceeded to paint more of his dreams on the canvas than originally planned as he sat on the window sill, the night before, with the turrets of the State Hospital for the Insane forming the perspective of his vision.

"I've just had an endowment insurance policy mature, Miss Paull, and I know of no better way in which to invest part of it. I'm tired of this 'on the bough' sort of existence. I want a home—not a hotel room, or apartment-house cubicle, nor even the purchasable share in some private boarding house. I want a real home. And this spot is ideal to me. It is out of—yet near—the city; on old ground; on the main-traveled highway—main-traveled now, as in Frémont's day. You see, I want a house with a patio like the old days. With plenty of broad verandas, where on Sundays I can sit in a deep rocker, or lie in a hammock, and watch the traffic along the highway."

One by one the blinds were edging up again; the trees, the meadows, the sky unfolding as the leaves of the sensitive plant when the effect of a jarring touch has been nullified by time.

"I am just old-fashioned enough, Miss Paull," he rushed on, talking as he had never before talked while with her, "to bemoan the fact that sitting on the front porch on Sundays after church, and watching the passers-by, or discussing the merits of the sermon with some neighbor guest, has fallen into disuse."

Peggy's laugh was appreciative music.

There was no pose, no dissembling in her spirited response:

"You make me think of things that haven't been in my mind for years! Of houses we lived in before father bought this last one, when 'Golden Rule' Borden went bankrupt. Why, when we lived in the cottage on the highway between Empire and Modesto, that was how father spent his Sundays! Sitting on the front porch and flagging every neighbor who passed along. You wouldn't believe it, Mr. Fordier, how much more my sisters and I knew of what was taking place in the world then, than now."

"And much more happier?" he suggested hopefully, daringly, eager brown eyes searching her vivacious face.

To the perverse in nature, thoughts are often rebels instantly turning a smiling landscape into a battlefield. It was at this instant that an impishly visioned dancer named Rossita whirled into Peggy's mind. She proved a veritable Joan of Arc, however, so far as Fordier's resolves were concerned. He was then nearer to surrendering logic to emotions, than at any moment of their whole acquaintance.

"Oh, as children, I suppose we were as happy as most," Peggy replied carelessly. Then changing the subject, asked with politely couched interest: "Do you intend to do anything to the channel, when you build your house?"

Fordier nodded affirmatively, carefully put his cap on his head, and then amplified the unspoken answer without zest:

"Dredge it enough to make a decent swimming pool. Will use the gravel to build the driveway I spoke of a while ago."

"How soon do you propose to start? Or is that inquiring too closely into very secret affairs?" The accompanying insinuating laugh was a little high-pitched for all its airiness.

Fordier was too hurt to deny or question the implication. His smiling exterior harbored the sensitive soul of the dreamer, the idealist. Her cold carelessness chilled him as a breath from a glacier. Indeed, it brought his thoughts bumping with a shock to that comparison of the evening before. There was no reason to believe that the Potato King had gone broke overnight!

"I wish I could give you something like a definite answer to that, Miss Paull," he returned, evenly matter-of-fact. "But, until I can find men who are willing to work a dredge out there, and ambition enough to lay the driveway, my plans stay on the architect's blue prints."

"Couldn't you build the road later?" she asked.

"Yes, but I don't intend to. I don't fancy living in a Rome of a thousand roads. That is what it would be out here if building materials were hauled in from any direction which chanced to suit the driver's fancy. There is considerable clay in the soil, Miss Paull, and you know what that means after the first few rains?"

"Dry bog," she answered succinctly.

"Exactly. So, for that reason, first I get the drive—then will be time enough to think definitely of the house. If you hear of any of those elusive humming birds, called unemployed, who really want employment, just send them to me. I'll give them work, pronto! Now," he said, casting an eye at the sun, hanging low over the range of squat hills beyond the city, their crests as clear-cut as etchings against the unclouded sky, "for the home trail—shall we?"

Peggy gave a start, and looked quickly at her wrist watch.

"Home it certainly must be," she exclaimed emphatically. "Why, father is having Mr. Belden and some others to dinner this evening. I must have plenty of time to dress. Must be a flame worth looking at—for all the festive little

moths, you know." There was forced coquetry in her laugh.

He made a blithe agreement, giving the words the same tone of indifference as he had read in hers, and met her laugh halfway.

Fordier wasn't one of nature's whiners. He felt he had lost—but that was no reason for tears. It was a time to make use of that enviable power of controlling hurts, submerging them in the buoyancy of irrepressible good humor.

In another moment, voicing laughter which neither really felt, they were leaving the peaceful benediction of the old *Populus Fremontii,* and starting on the bumping, jolting way across the neglected field, which in the cool of approaching night was breathing a tantalizing perfume of pungent tarweed—that perfume which has turned many an alienated son of the soil wretchedly homesick for a few minutes as he swept along some by-lane in his luxurious motor car.

It was this faint scent that crept into Peggy's senses a hundred times and ways during the hours that followed. It mingled with the flowers Belden brought as a peace offering—and which Peggy, only by sheer exertion of will power, kept from flinging into the glowing coals of the fireplace. It floated between the pages of the music turned by one of the younger men of the party. And in the sleepless hours after the guests had gone their laughing, talking, smoking ways, wafted in through every open window on every breeze that swayed the shadowy curtains.

Tarweed! Breath of neglected fields! How its perfume clings to memory with all the persistency with which its stains are retained by white skirts!

With every whiff there came to Peggy the tormenting vision of a dancer with floating draperies—so much so, that those wind-swayed curtains produced such realistic annoyance that the maid the next morning found them twisted and knotted into mere ropes, which were then pinned securely to the walls on either side of the windows. And she wondered and wondered why!

VIII.

THE future didn't look very roseate to Wayne Fordier either that evening, or the next day. He had sat on the window sill in the dark, smoking more cigarettes than is good for the nerves of the youngest and hardiest of men, and in the classroom had found it difficult to concentrate on the Gallic Wars.

While the sophomore girls and boys singsonged about the *Treveri* retreating panic-stricken to their homes, leaving the enemy waving the banner of temporary victory, Professor Fordier's thoughts were in the twentieth century, and concerned with romance and economics.

Suppose a man possessed an income only large enough to support a family of two—or three!—in modest comfort—did love justify him in asking a rich man's daughter to preside over a house of which she had heard the plans?

"*'Quibus omnibus rebus permoti equites Treveri,'*" droned a red-faced fat boy expressionlessly.

"What shall I do? Let the time-honored precedent definitely decide the issue? Or take a chance against the money?" mulled the usually enthusiastic expositor of Cæsar's campaigns lost dully in his own battlefield.

But coming from school in the afternoon he had his woolgathering senses shaken to renewed life by the sight of an excited group on the banks of Mormon Channel just a few yards from where he had constructed the house of cards the day before.

The group was composed of a half-dozen boys, clothed in muddy bathing trunks.

"Playing hookey from their closing afternoon classes, to take a late autumn swim in the channel," he judged, but with a sympathetic smile. "That dig-

ging, though? Perhaps I'd better drive out. See what they've lost or found."

"Gold! Gold!" they shouted at him, before he had time to halt the machine. "See, we've struck it rich! We're finding it in chunks in the mud here," they chorused in enthusiastic exaggeration, and clambered onto the running board to show him three little nuggets ranging in size from a grain of wheat to a pomegranate seed.

Fordier juggled the glittering bits interestedly in his hand. He was deeply puzzled. Perhaps no one had heard more of the history of California's mines than had he, but in none of the tales, ranging from the Modoc Lava Beds to the Superstition Mountains, from Bodega Bay to Mono Lake, could he recall any mention of Stockton's ever being considered worth the labor and time and expense of honeycombing for auriferous metal. Had those mining-mad pioneers overlooked such a free-gold bet as this—that schoolboys might discover it while playing hookey?

The irony of this possibility made him laugh. What a satiric jest on those hardy frequenters of Grosjean's!

He stopped amid the thought, and looked up at the cottonwood standing alone on the channel bank—a silver-haired sentinel arustle with gentle grace above tule and tarweed. It seemed to his ears—as his mind created a picture of that vanished past—that he could hear the click of castanets, the chiming of feminine laughter, the stamping of heavy boots to the music of guitars and violins. He turned back to the boys.

"How long since you discovered this?" he asked anxiously.

Not so very long, they answered, being in their excitement vague as to the actual passage of time. Further questioning elicited the fact that all of the original discoverers were there. But one boy, more enterprising than his playmates, guessed that he'd go into town quickly, to get his father, and a shovel and pan. Then they could mine like regular miners.

The five others immediately remembered they had fathers and other resources at home, also.

Fordier halted the marathon, however.

From old-time miners, he had heard vivid, veracious tales of stampedes. How such news covered distance with the speed of a prairie fire; gathered a crowd quicker than a dog fight on an empty street. His glance took in the location of his tree of dreams, set in the corner of his acre. Imagination swiftly pictured worse conditions at the channel side of it, than could ever be brought about by a thousand trucks poaching erratic courses through the rain-wet, surrounding field.

He realized if he was to protect his property, he must act at once.

"If you'll wait until I drive in some stakes marking a lot of mine up there by the cottonwood," he told the boys, who were milling like a pack of eager hounds about his machine, "I'll drive you in to town."

"All of us?" they shrilled in unison.

"As many as can stick on the old car," he assured in a tone of camaraderie, which kept him the playground idol out at Riverferry.

With six rooters, urging "Hurry! Hurry!" trailing at his heels, it didn't take long to pace off the square, using the tree, the city limits, the channel, as markers. When the stakes—made of a broken limb of the old tree—were in place, he started the little "road bug" bouncing across the neglected field between the tree and the highway, the boys clinging to it like bulldogs to the heels of a frightened steer.

One by one these clingers were shed in the race through the streets of the town, until when he parked his car finally in front of the courthouse, Fordier was alone. He was inside but a few minutes —a visit to the city attorney's office, to

verify a point of law, and to the sheriff's. A half hour later, accompanied by two deputies, he was once more driving—at a speed undreamed of by either Frémont or Ulysses S. Grant—over this main Stockton road.

His speed was justified, too, for his fears were well founded. The small town's Marconi system had been sparking snappily since the precipitous arrival of the "Eureka" sextet.

You've seen people collect from nowhere to cluster about a street brawl? Seen them come running from all directions to witness a fire? That's the impression gained along the streets they passed, and even a few scurrying human jack rabbits were bobbing along the banks of the channel when Fordier and his two starred companions came to a jolting stop under the shade of the historic tree.

Sunset and darkness found a milling crowd cursing the inopportune descent of night. And the sun rose the following morning on one of the strangest scenes that Stockton—pioneer town, dating from the 'forties—ever witnessed.

Men, women, children of all ages, speaking a polyglot of tongues, wove a living fringe along the banks of the channel, save on Fordier's acre, where only two men—wearing conspicuous badges—patrolled the banks. And tools? Men with goldpans, which had belonged to their fathers and grandfathers, and had lain rusting in attics these many years; women with dishpans, with milk pans; children with washbasins, and some of the most ignorant, with crockery and tubs! All were energetically bent upon washing gold from the dirt they scooped up in these receptacles—and each group was getting enough "color" with an occasional frenzy-creating nugget to keep aching arms from giving up the struggle, rheumatic joints bending with excitement, and clamoring stomachs empty.

No one, who has not witnessed such a scene knows what potency the tiniest speck of "flour gold" even, will have on the majority of otherwise sane individuals. There is a magic about the mere word, that gives it a greater power of attraction than other metals of more commercial value. For who wouldn't get more thrills from mining for gold, glittering gold, than—say—from tungsten; or that peculiar transparent green talc, the two greatest scorners and slaves of electricity?

Sunset this time found the town gold mad. The knowledge that *it* was out there for any one to come and get—for since Mormon Channel flowed through the city limits, mining claims could not be staked where the strike was made—awakened the dollar lust that lies dormant in the most civilized of human beings.

Outside the city limits, however, where absent landlords permitted, innumerable claims had been staked illegally by the greedy, but these were soon abandoned, when pan after pan, taken from that portion of the stream, gave up nothing but mud and gravel and sand, while inside the city limits, a child with a soup plate scooped up one nugget valued between three and four dollars.

That is the tale the day told over and over; the gold lay only within the city—or? That "or" represented the only spot of surmise, the privately owned acre immediately adjoining the limits of the town—the acre on which the old cottonwood tree swayed serenely, its far-flung roots at the channel's bank undisturbed by careless diggers. No one knew what might be there, and no one could find out. The two armed deputies saw to that.

But while the owner might have the law on his side, folks at large had the full license of imagination—and oh, the flights that were essayed! The term "pocket gold," was alike, on envious and credulous tongue.

Nor were all these surmises based on the foundation of forbidden fruit, purely and simply. There was logic in their reasoning. The richest pans *had* been washed from the inches downstream, nearest the city boundary of the little square of law-protected soil, which was a lively court-plaster, in irritating effect, to every envious sinner in covetousness.

Before the sun reached the meridian that day, Wayne Fordier, scion of gentlemen of Virginia and Fontainebleau, had been called anything but a worthy bearer of that blood heritage, both by neighbors upstream and down. As a swarm of locusts, the black word traveled and multiplied, and threatened to devastate his established reputation.

He had been guilty of the crime unforgivable, they averred. He had taken advantage of little children. Had collected the best of the strike for himself. Thus the story ran from ear to tongue, from tongue to ear, regardless of what infinitesimal elements of truth it might contain.

IX.

BUT such is the world, this one publicly decried act, the one which threatened to put an unpopular label on the young high-school teacher, was the first thing that old John Paull had ever heard that kindled in him the tiniest spark of admiration for Peggy's unavowed suitor.

"Is the history-spouter coming over to-night, Peggy?" it prompted him to ask on their way into the dining room that evening.

Peggy was looking as natural as a hod-carrier in overalls. The familiar blue taffeta showed the usual amount of white-silk hose above unexaggerated white-kid heels. But under the customary touches of powder and rouge and lipstick, she was a little paler than ordinary, perhaps, while her eyes hinted of tears but recently and copiously shed. At her father's question, however, they flashed scornfully.

"I hope not!" She expressed herself with unusual irascibility.

The Potato King pursed his lips knowingly. There was something very akin to pleasure in his shrewd old eyes. So, the gossip had reached home before him! Excellent! All the weightier it would score on his side now, since others had flown to her with the disillusioning story.

"Is Andy?" he followed up with quickening interest.

Peggy accorded this a grimace of distaste, also.

"Again I can say, 'I hope not!'"

They were now seated vis-à-vis. Before unfolding his napkin, Paull frowned, then questioned, half provocatively and half in vexatious curiosity: "What's the trouble, Peggy? At outs with both your admirers?"

Peggy sent a withering look across the width of the table, and deliberately unfolded her napkin before replying.

"They may be *my* admirers," she said pointedly, "but I'm not theirs! Andrew Belden is just a plain money-grubber. He has all of the soul and tact and good manners of a—a Tapuyan Indian!"

Her father gave this a "Hr-r-umph!" of disqualification.

"You'll find that a husband whose nerve centers are located in his pocketbook is the kind to grab onto these days," he observed complacently. "What do you want, anyway," he demanded irritably a moment later—"a curly-haired popinjay, who can bow and smirk like a dancing master every time you look his way?"

"I at least don't want one who sulks," retorted his daughter heatedly.

"Well, by the soul of Lafitte, if I wouldn't rather have one who sulked occasionally, as one who has ideas *on,* and words to speak *of* every danged subject under the sun!"

Peggy didn't argue the point. She

gave Hicks opportunity to serve the first course in peaceful silence. But her thoughts were busy—engaged in a comparison of "mental exiles" and "international minds," with the accent of preference, it must be admitted, stressed on the latter!

Her father tasted the soup, found it invitingly palatable, and was willing to let conversation languish for a while, also. But his curiosity was yet unsatisfied on one point. To change this, he inquired presently with wily suggestiveness:

"And the schoolmaster? What is the worm you've suddenly discovered under his gentlemanly jacket?"

There was annihilation in the look that was flashed across the table at him.

"Anybody," she announced distinctly, "who will deliberately cheat little children, is not listed among those *I* admire! Enough said, isn't it? Let's talk of the weather, or at least something agreeable."

John Paull didn't pursue the subject further. He hadn't as yet had the opportunity to tell Belden about the ring—for that gentleman, like the majority of untrammeled Stockton, had spent the day, not in the office, but out on the banks of the channel. Now that the schoolmaster's "goose had been hung high" by gossip, however, Peggy's father felt that hasty aggressive action on his part was unnecessary. He was surer of ultimate victory of his plans than at any time previous. Mentally, he could already catch the sparkle on the hand now toying with the soup spoon—toying, for Peggy was only pretending to eat. The thought and sight of food made her slightly nauseous.

So willingly the Potato King dropped Wayne Fordier as a topic of conversation, feeling he was an issue as dead as the Anti-Panama Canal agitation of Roosevelt's administration.

True there had been that flare of admiration of the man who seemingly so cleverly annexed the choicest bit of the channel from all the rest of the town, but it was not deep, nor lasting interest. And it was threaded with skeptical and wily thoughts. The main reason why John Paull wanted to see his business manager that evening was to plan for the acquisition of that desirable bit of property—if possible!

Which shows how deeply John Paull considered the schoolmaster's business acumen was rooted!

X.

WHEN Belden came in later, the Potato King was alone in his library, stockinged feet on a bassock, charcoal tablets on the table beside him, and an opened book on his knees.

The newcomer was volubly excited. He put the invariable, unoriginal oblong florist's box on the table, when he saw that the expected recipient of the gift wasn't present, and drew a chair up close to his host's side, and launched into a full tide of words.

His moist hands had itched in vain to lay a possessive grip on that choice bit of property, he explained—though hardly in those words! He had been to interview the owner of that acre—but with disappointing results, he complained.

He might have used the word "disconcerting" also, and been absolutely truthful in his report. His visit to Fordier was very ill-timed. That red-headed gentleman was justifiably developing a pronounced case of nerves. Too many cigarettes in the dark hours of the night, and the increasing complexities of the channel problem would have dampened the welcome extended to a bosom friend.

Belden was scarcely that, and when his initial, jovial friendliness produced all the effect of grains of sand tossed against a plate-glass mirror, he had switched to the Paull tactics and tried to tell Fordier where to "head in." In effect, he was taken by the collar and shown the front

steps. Fordier didn't use physical force to bring this departure about—but he expressed his agitated desires on the subject, and set a time limit wherein the visitor might "depart of his own momentum!"

"I made it quite plain, Mr. Paull, that it was for you I wished to dicker," Belden explained in an aggrieved manner; also, by way of adding a vindicative score against the "in-law" rival. "And the only reasons he would give for refusing to do business, was that he didn't want the property he owned here on the channel bank spoiled. He intends to build a house there, he says. And he doesn't want the 'topography of the spot'—those are his words, not mine!—'changed, for historic reasons.'"

Old Paull snorted derisively. Neither spoke for a little.

"But if we can prove that it is mineral land——" the old man mused hopefully.

"I saw our attorney," put in Belden, shaking his head. "Nothing doing, he says. It is patented land. He had a bona fide title to it."

"Then he doesn't have to mine it, unless he wants to?"

"Uh-huh."

"How about leasing it? Or exchanging it?"

"Nothing doing. He has historic reasons, he says, for holding it himself."

The Potato King's lips pressed into a straight hard line. The gray mustache bristled.

"Historic fiddlesticks!" he exploded finally. He knows we're after it, that's it! A big company—and he means to hang out for a bigger price."

"Maybe," admitted the other. "But he certainly has the best of that channel bank sewed up hard and tight. Miss Peggy home?" he inquired, eyes resting on the florist's box, unopened, undelivered.

Abstractedly, old Paull sent Hicks to summons the reluctant Peggy. While they were waiting for her to come down, Paull mused aloud:

"I've a good mind to call up Fordier myself, Andy. Ask personally if he will consider an offer. Ask it as a sort of personal favor," and he winked knowingly at Belden, who guffawed in huge delight.

"Won't do any harm to try it," was the laughing encouragement. "If he gets the idea that a mining claim will put him more in the good graces of a certain girl's father—well, the best of us get stung now and then, eh?"

Then there was a duet of loud, derisive laughter.

The connection was secured promptly—for even the exchange girls had a whole-souled respect for the Potato King's tongue! The conversation followed, brief, and to the point.

The property was positively not for sale, exchange, or for leasing.

"Why?"

"For historical reasons, Mr. Paull. I'm sorry."

"Sorry, be danged!" shouted the irate, baffled man of finances—and slammed the receiver onto the hook.

Hicks slunk in the doorway in the ensuing silence. He would rather, far, have broken the Ten Commandments along with the best set of Paul Haviland as this space of no words. But when his employer's eyes caught sight of him, there was no alternative.

"Miss Peggy begs to be excused from coming down this evening, sir. She is indisposed. I am to send Martin up with some aspirin tablets, sir."

Old Paull's face didn't break out in joyous smiles when he turned his countenance full on his caller. And the latter sat uneasily in his chair, awaiting the explosion he sensed was imminent.

"What have you two been scrapping about now?" the old man demanded, when Hicks had glided out.

"I don't know, sir," answered the other squirming, and running a hot fin-

ger around the collar that had suddenly developed cinchlike propensities. "Unless she's still sore about Sunday evening."

"Well, dang it all, what happened Sunday evening?" cried the old man, hopping up, then remembering he was in his stockinged feet, which were not comfortable to stamp about him, sat down heavily in the padded chair again, and glared at the other's reddening face.

"I—I expressed my ideas about the dress she wore, sir," began Belden sullenly.

Old Paull bounced in his chair, and banged his fists on the padded arms.

"You expressed your ideas about her dress? Well, by the soul of Lafitte, you picked a fine subject! A wise subject! One that a simpering—— Hell's bells, Andy! Don't you know women any better than that? Criticize their brains, their virtue—but lay off their clothes. Leave clothes alone! By the time you and Peggy raise three girls—though may the Lord sandwich a boy or two in the lot!—by the time you have raised even *one* girl, you'll know that the only way to keep on the good side of a woman, old, young, big, or little, is to let her wear anything—or nothing—as she chooses! You just ask the Lord for grace to bear it, or develop poor eyesight!"

For the second time that day, Andrew Belden didn't linger over farewells. This time he went down the front steps agitatedly asking the question of how in the wide, wide world, and in the nether regions beyond, was he ever going to stand "that old reprobate for a father-in-law?"

XI.

BELDEN, however, didn't go to his hotel, and to bed, and sulk in secluded silence. The smooth-purring Stutz hummed on its cord tires as he left the city behind him, to stop only when he came to an obscure boat landing, where he commanded a grinning, conspicuously dentated, little brown man to take him across to the largest of the channel islands, belonging to the Paull Corporation.

Without delay he was seated in a small gasoline launch, and put-putting over the murky waters. Fordier's dismissal rankled; John Paull's call-down made him sullenly vindictive. "There was this thousand-to-one shot that he could "put one over" on the one, and made the other bow in reacknowledgment of the shrewdness of his intellect! He was taking it.

While he was chugging morosely over the dark waters of the channel, Fordier was bumping across the field toward the tree that was the storm center of a hectoring city, and of his own vexing thoughts. John Paull's offer was but the latest of an apparently endless chain of proposals which had been put to him by friend, acquaintance, and stranger, within the past twenty-four hours, and in the parlance of the street, these demands and obligatory refusals were "getting his goat."

"They say, already, that I'm a scoundrel," he thought bitterly, as he jounced recklessly over squirrel holes and adobe clods. "If I told them the truth, they wouldn't believe me. No more than he" —meaning the profane Potato King— "did a while ago. It makes me wish that Marshall had died in infancy! That my mother hadn't followed Ruthlike, after father from Virginia. I even wish that California had gone through all eternity a howling wilderness!"

As in punctuation of this trio of wishes, he stopped the car with a jerk. A stentorian challenge came from the shadows of the tree, and a tall form advanced toward the machine. A moment or so later, Fordier was walking with the challenger to the channel's edge, where they were immediately joined by a second man, whose breast flashed a star.

Standing there in the path of shadow

cast by the towering old cottonwood, Fordier talked with the two men, while a few yards away, tongues of light from a well-fed camp fire silhouetted a group engaged in animated discussion, and other less robust men rolled in blankets sleeping after a back-bending, wearying day in mud and water.

The same scene was repeated a trifle less distinctly a few yards farther away; and on, and on, until a pocket-flash of firelight alone told of the most distant camp. Women's laughter came from somewhere downstream; a child cried; a dog barked in intermittent staccato. Then somebody with a banjo struck up a syncopated tune. Mixed voices took it up, and pitched the melody clearly through the night air, threading it now and then with a distinct word of the song. The city itself seemed but little less remote than the stars, whose lights it tried to imitate on the lower plane of darkness.

The music brought back the thoughts of Tuesday to Fordier. He turned his eyes to the tree—disturber of his peace, landmark to his threatened castles in Spain—and the plunkety-plunk of the banjo drifted into the softer cadence of guitar and violin, and with a swirl of silken fringes, and heart-stirring rhythm of castanets, Rossita, queen of the dance, reached through time and space, and for a little clutched again at his imagination, and filled his senses with breath-arresting illusions.

The oldest of the deputies shattered the vision; twisted his emotions back to the troublesome present.

"If you do decide to sell or exchange, Mr. Fordier," said the man, McMasters, a six-foot ex-bartender, who had had sufficient pull in politics to get in on all the sheriff's office plums since his union went into the national discard, "why, just let me know, won't you? I'd like to have first option on it."

The two were now alone. The younger guard had gone back to his post, which was at the corner close to that camp fire on the other side of the city limits. There were scores of fingers over there that itched to rock a pan of dirt scooped from the forbidden side of the line.

"'*Et tu, Brute,*'" returned Fordier, and the bitterness of his accompanying laughter produced a chilling, uneasy effect on the maker of the offer.

Though McMasters didn't know what eating two brutes had to do with the matter, the tone of that mirth added weight to the belief that he was somewhat inclined to entertain as truth, i. e., his employer was "kind o' nutty about some things."

There was a long silence. Fordier took out his cigarette case, extended it opened to the other; carefully pinched the fire from the match after it had lighted both smokes, then tossed it into the unmuddied waters close to their feet.

"No, Mac, I won't even promise *you* an option," he remarked presently. "I wouldn't sell it for any price. There isn't another piece of property existing for which I would consider exchanging it. For sentimental reasons, if you will—but, reasons wherein sentiment and history are indissolubly intertwined. I won't have so much as one tiny root of that tree disturbed. To the best of my knowledge, they must spread out underground, possibly to within four or five feet of this bank. Candidly," he went on after a moment, in impulsive confidence, "I'm straight up against it."

This transfixed the deputy's wandering attention.

"I've reached the point where I absolutely don't know what to do. I can't go on keeping you men out here doing day and night duty for time unending. The money I'm paying out to you, to keep vandals off here, is some I have been planning to use to build a graveled roadway, and other things. Yet, I know that the minute I take you men off, that crowd down there—the 'unemployed' whom I've been trying un-

successfully to hire to do honest, paying work—will swoop down on this bank. Inside of twelve hours, this spot—where I hope to grow flowers on the edge of a clear, deep swimming pool—will look like that dump does along out there."

And, even in the dark, by the aid of fire-flashes from the camps, and the light of the stars, one could make out the unsightly hummocks of sand and gravel and sun-caking mud that were growing and multiplying where tarweed and tule had swayed pungently and gracefully but a matter of hours before.

"Then why not lease, Mr. Fordier?" suggested the officer, for reasons not altogether altruistic.

"Come over to the tree, Mac. I'm tired and want something to prop my back against, I'll tell you a little story. Remember, it is the truth, please. Try to believe I'm not quite as black as every one is painting me. Then, when you know the truth—tell me, if *your* conscience would permit *you* to give even a lease. If, yes," he hesitated, then added with a friendly laugh, "I suppose, it would be *good business* for me to remove temptation from *your* path, Mac, by doubling your wages."

His companion greeted this with an echoing laugh—but it was an uncertain echo. More queerness, more queerness! Still he was giving strict attention to the listening part of it!

"Then as my agent," continued Fordier, "give you permission to drive the best bargain you could, with whomsoever you might—with one exception," he amended quickly, and with emphasis. "That exception is Mr. John Paull. For personal reasons, you understand." He turned toward the tree.

XII.

WONDERINGLY the hired officer of the law followed over to the denser shadows of the cottonwood, and inside of fifteen minutes, Fordier was concluding:

"Now, it's in your hands, Mac. That's the absolute truth of the matter. If you can conscientiously get that confounded gold away from these banks so that I can some day get my swimming pool, and quit spending the money just to keep those men over there from swarming on here, messing my property, and upsetting my plans—why, go to it, and make it snappy!" He laughed, then reminded shrewdly and broadly, "Don't forget you're *my agent*, though. You're now working for me, at double salary!"

"I get you," the six-footer acknowledged with an answering grin. Sitting there on the ground, his long limbs jackknifed, he looked like a "25" some giant had scored in a ghostly game of mumblety-peg. "There ought to be some way of doing it, Mr. Fordier," he said musingly.

There was a long pause. The dog down the channel barked, barked, then yelped, and ki-yied into distance-dwindling silence. Figures moved in fixed purpose about the nearest camp fire; sparks spurted high in air, as new fuel was tossed upon living coals.

McMasters suddenly slapped his attenuated legs.

"By George, I have it! A clamshell dredger, Mr. Fordier, and sluice boxes!"

With excited illustrative gestures he sketched the new-born plan:

"You see, one of those clamshell dredgers could be moved in here easily. There are several of them scattered among the islands, and up and down the channel. They use them to keep the waterways deep enough for bigger boats. They are on flat-bottomed floats, and are moved by gasoline launches. And the clamshell could scoop up the gravel and mud from the bed of the stream out there, and as much of the bank as you'd want taken away. Four feet? Say, four feet of it, then, and dump it into a hopper. Water could be pumped by the same power that run the dredger itself—onto this gravel and dirt, and wash it

through some graded sluice boxes, separating the gold, then dumping the clean gravel onto another float.

"The clamshell could be swung around on a boom, to this float, pick up the gravel—which would then be valueless to the ones who were after the gold—dump it into piles here on the bank—no, by George, better than that! Dump it into dumpcarts or wheelbarrows. Have them haul it right out to where you wanted it between here and the highway. There is no coarse rock here, and they could dump it out there in piles, ever so far apart—and then, Mr. Fordier, all that would be left for you to do to have your road all ready to drive your Lizzie over, would be to hire somebody with a strong back and a shovel to scatter the gravel out the width you wanted the road to be! By George, it could be done that way, Mr. Fordier, as sure as you and me are sitting here smoking this minute. If help is needed in building the sluices, I know an old stew-bum over town, who used to be a miner. He'd lay out a stamp mill for you if you showed him a buck."

The young school-teacher's keen imagination caught the salient points of the picture the other had painted, but—well, this "but" was incorporated in his question:

"Do you suppose anybody would agree to do it just in that way?"

The six-footer laughed. He waved his hand downstream.

"Notice how many have been taking their chances of pneumonia, rheumatism and pleurisy by sloshing and wading down there in mud and water these last couple of days? Men will do anything, risk anything for gold. I don't know," he confessed with a deprecatory laugh, "but there's something about it that a man simply can't resist. And, from what they've been finding below us here, if *I* owned a clamshell, or knew where I could rent one cheap—or you hadn't bribed me by raising my pay," another deprecatory laugh, "by George, I wouldn't turn up my nose at a chance to do the sluicing out there myself."

Fordier smiled a little wearily.

"The thought of what may, or may not, be there, doesn't give me a single thrill. The power of responding to the lure of gold is apparently absent from my general ensemble. All that I want out here, is the peace and quiet that was here Monday. The sooner you can get rid of what gold there is along that bank, the better pleased I shall be." Getting to his feet, an action quickly followed by his companion, he held out his hand.

"Thank you, Mac. You've taken a load off my mind. A few more days and nights of this worry, and I should have been a fit subject for the 'Cuckoo Cage' out by the park."

The tall man walked beside him to the machine. A few final instructions, then he watched the car sway erratically out to the highway, where its pur became less protesting, and finally died in the distance.

McMasters went back to the edge of the purling stream, where he stood, tall, and thin, and like a totem pole in the starlight, and looked down into the gliding waters, wishing he might read with his own eyes the glittering secret that lay in its depths.

After a long time of speculations, of weighing of the facts he had just heard, and of reviewing the bargain he had made, and the plans for which he had been responsible, he shoved his hands into his pockets, as though to get them out of temptation's way, and started on a patrol of the little square.

"A bird in the hand is worth two twittering on a rainbow," was his philosophical summary. "Of course, he may be a devil of a liar. Or maybe a bigger fool than I've been thinking him. Either way, though, it's plain what side my bread is sure enough buttered on. It's up to me to do business with the

first customer who will come to my terms in the morning."

The customer came before the sun was rid of her dawn-red draperies.

By nine o'clock the sight of a small gasoline launch dragging a dredger and float behind her, like an ant transporting the edible carcass of a bluebottle fly, threw the channel throngs into even wilder excitement than the latest wheat-grain nugget. The sound of hammers beating an energetic tattoo out on the adjoining float, received more attention there on the channel banks than did clamoring stomachs when the noonday whistles sounded the call throughout the city. But at two-twenty-eight, exactly, that afternoon when the clamshell closed its cavernous jaws over the first bite from the spot which had for so many hours been the cynosure of so many covetous eyes, jeers—not cheers—were mingled with the sighs.

Another black mark was posted after the name of Wayne Fordier. Little brown men swarmed on the dredger; little brown men operated it; on shore, little brown men with wheelbarrows, trundled the gravel and dumped it where, after three-thirty—an increasingly unpopular red-headed man told them to.

Fordier not only cheated children, but he was a traitor to his State—he had leased to an Oriental!

XIII.

In accordance with the plans, on which the Paull Potato Corporation, Limited, had been silently and systematically working for many weeks, Belden left for San Francisco that morning. He didn't leave too early, however, to give, over the telephone, a chuckling, delighted sanction for the use of certain of the company's property; nor to miss a call from a sleepy-eyed, aggrieved young man. This youth, known to the elect as the Potato King's secretary, bore a final—though unnecessary—letter of instructions, to which the corporation's president had appended a postscript, cunningly devised to liquidate any grudge the business manager might be nursing over the previous night's call-down.

"You are expected back for your answer Saturday night, remember," was how it read. "Make a guess at the size of the ring. The bells will be ringing along about New Year's."

At nine o'clock, when Fordier was calling the roll in his first-year Spanish class, and the little gasoline launch was panting up the channel with the clamshell dredger in tow, and Belden was humming along, thirty-five miles an hour, on the highway toward the city, old John Paull was down in the corporation's offices, giving the signal which started the entire office force on a two-day race, in which time, they'll tell you, they earned every nickel of their salaries!

Not until Saturday night did the Potato King take his capable fingers off the pulse of the market, or let his mind stray beyond the world of spuds. By that time he had accomplished his purpose. The consumer would know what this was, at Thanksgiving time when he was paying for potatoes at the rate of ten dollars a sack!

In these two days, Peggy scarcely caught more than fleeting glimpses of her father, getting into his car early in the morning, or surrounded by men and cigar smoke in the library late into the night.

Dinner Saturday evening, however, was a festive affair, with only Belden's face missing from the 40-watt Mazdas forming the bright lights of the Paull Corporation's board of directors. And at its close, they, with their more or less charming helpmates, were sent on to the theater to round out the celebration, with their host and hostess' promise to join them there as soon as the tardy absentee

—delayed evidently by some road trouble—should arrive.

After they had gone, laughing and jesting familiarly in that supreme good humor which follows rich foods and mellow wines partaken in formal, expensive clothes and surroundings, their host and his daughter, in the quick-fallen silence, drew their chairs before the library fire.

The old man was impatient, nervous, anxious; the girl, with bowed head, was studying the flowers which she had worn as her corsage bouquet. Unpinned and wilting, she held them now in her hands, life and beauty dying out of them, as it was dying out of her secret dreams.

There was no pleasure, no vivacity in her face—only that far-away pensiveness which gave to her Celtic beauty an expression almost saintlike. She was all in silver, with a film of soft illusion across her bare shoulders, and the firelight gave the faint radiance of a halo to the curling tendrils of her short hair.

Her beauty stirred a deep vein of affection in her father's heart. She looked so young, so frail—a lily, that too rough hands could break so easily—that he was half inclined to question the wisdom of forcing his choice on her. He had done well by the other two girls, though, and success begets success. There was no reason for failing this time. Besides, a keen-witted business man would be the surest protection he could rear up for her between the Paull dollars and a world notoriously given to preying on fair inheritors of fortunes.

So back into its pigeonhole went the half-doubt.

It, however, stayed in the open long enough to create a reflex vision of the rival he had rejected. For the first time since his thoughts had concentrated with full force upon the cornering of the potato market, he gave attention to the mining proposition that had so unexpectedly been born in the quiet old town.

"Wonder what the schoolmaster will be saying about his gold claim now?" he mused aloud. "Guess I'll have to take a ride out there in the morning. Look the ground over for myself. If it's worth it, I might make him a definite offer."

Peggy smiled without looking up. It was a smile that left a scornful twist at the corners of her mouth.

"You're a little too late for that, I believe, father," she informed, and the scornful expression stayed on her lips.

"Did that young scoundrel let somebody else have it, after I phoned him myself?" roared old Paull in fine fettle. He could lose himself in indignation without much ado, after a big dinner such as he had just eaten, and before be had begun mixing the black medicinal confections with his words!

Peggy nodded confirmation.

"You and he are joint bearers of the worst names in town to-night," she said enlighteningly, but without a great show of emotion. She was in spirit too dull, too heavy of heart, for either real amusement or anger.

In words colorful and picturesque—though scarcely printable!—her father wanted to know "how come?"

"It seems he was a hypocrite as well as a cheater of children. He criticized you and your actions regarding Alien Land affairs—now he has leased that claim of his to one of them!"

Paull's old blue eyes flew wide with astonishment at this. Previous to that minute, the Potato King would have convicted the scorned one on most any count save insincerity. Words, even exclamatory profanity, failed him.

"About twenty of them are operating a dredger out there," Peggy continued bitterly. "Out at the tennis match today, I heard that the 'little yellow devils had already cleaned up about seventy-five dollars,' and they only started working the thing late yesterday afternoon."

There was contemptuous fire in her

eyes, and almost apoplectic unbelief in her father's face, when she concluded.

At this very inopportune time, the soft-footed, soft-voiced Hicks announced tentatively, "Mr. Belden and Mr. Fordier, sir."

"Show them in," blared the master of the house, squaring himself in his chair, and Peggy knew that a cyclone was due to hit one of the arrivals, and was vindictive enough to be glad; while Hicks knew it was time for servants to keep out of sight and be speedy of foot and keen of ear should the library bell jingle a single jangle.

XIV.

"So," demanded the Potato King, after passing Belden on to Peggy, and slurring the formalities of greeting to the red-headed newcomer, whom pure chance had found on the top step of the Paull mansion when Belden had drawn up at the bottom one in dusty, perspiring haste. "So, my money wasn't good enough for you, Mr. Fordier? You lease to a rice-eater by preference? I think I ought to be told the reason I wasn't given first chance at it. After I telephoned you personally that way?"

Wayne Fordier laughed as blithely as he had a week ago. His nights of worries had been ended so simply and easily that he was almost ashamed that he had ever let himself be concerned over the situation out at the cottonwood. He had come calling in gay good humor, and the querulousness of a host, who was never a personification of jovial amiability, didn't dampen his spirits.

With laughter flecks doing a merry dance in his brown eyes, he countered the charge:

"You weren't given first chance, or any chance, Mr. Paull, because when I gave my agent permission to lease certain portions of my holdings out there on the channel, I specified distinctly that he was to make one exception. He was not to lease it to Mr. John Paull."

The Potato King seemed in a fair way to explode. He stamped his feet. He glared. He gritted his teeth over a black pellet.

"You scoundrel! You double crosser! You hypocrite! You did it on purpose, then?"

The young man passed the uncomplimentary names by. He had heard so many and worse ones since Tuesday, that his sensibilities were becoming hardened.

"Yes, I did it intentionally," he admitted candidly and without shame.

John Paull choked. He sputtered:

"And you have the gall to sit there, and tell me *that* to my face!" Leaning forward, and pounding out the words on the table between them, he concluded, "Why wasn't my money good enough for you? I want to know why. Do you hear me: Why?"

Fordier hesitated an appreciable moment. He gave a swift glance at Peggy. Old Paull had transfixed his attention so immediately after entrance, that there hadn't been time to really give her an undivided moment. That unexpected look now, showed the question "Why?" written over all else on her face, also. So the next instant Fordier had flung logic and indecision behind him, as a tenor flings his cape back over his shoulder when he is going to burst into the high notes of his song.

"Because, this evening, I intend to ask your daughter to be my wife, sir. I didn't suppose that selling or leasing you a gold brick would help my cause any."

Blushing thoroughly and completely, he flashed an embarrassed apology at the girl.

Peggy, after one gasp, gave him a glimpse of confusion mingled with encouragement, and met her father's eyes in a challenge of triumph. She would have liked to have flung the cry of "Leap Year" in his face. Telepathy being no fanciful theory, John Paull knew

this as quickly as she entertained the thought.

While the old man was trying to get words into action, diplomatically letting the commercial phase of it take precedence over the disconcerting announcement, Belden leaned back in his chair, near Peggy, his heavy jowls quivering with complacent amusement, and a hot, moist hand snuggled down in the pocket of his business suit—for delayed by a broken spring, he had driven directly there without taking time to go to his hotel to change. This hand closed over a plush-covered box, the satin lining of its lid bearing the name of the most fashionable jeweler in San Francisco.

"Gold brick?" questioned old Paull in fine-edged skepticism.

Fordier was glad that this half of his announcement was accepted for discussion rather than the other. He wasn't cowed in any sense of the word, but he was more than a little flustered.

"That's all it amounts to, Mr. Paull," he asserted firmly.

Belden couldn't keep his secret hidden longer. His exultant laugh drew the combined attention of all the others.

"Don't you ever believe it, Mr. Paull," he contradicted flatly. "That's just sour-grape talk on his part. I haven't had a chance to tell you *our* part of that deal. You've kept me too busy on potatoes ever since. Where he thought he was double crossing you, he missed a bet. When I left you Thursday night, I went out to see Oshida, on Center Island. He had my orders to get hold of the property *any* way that he could. He wired me last night he had a lease on part of it, and was using a clamshell dredger. That during the afternoon they had cleaned up about seventy-five dollars. At that rate, I don't know what to-day's profits will net us. In the neighborhood of two hundred, I should imagine."

Old Paull lay back in his chair and laughed until tears bleared his sight.

"Oshida!" That was all he said, but it was a name of victory.

And Belden, clutching the box in his pocket, looked pityingly over at the young man, whose face had been as red as his hair for a few moments, but was now pale, while the laughter flecks had changed to spots of vivid anger.

XV.

"PLEASE believe me, sir, when I say, had I known it was *your* money involved, I should never have countenanced the deal."

Wayne Fordier was standing, very erect and commanding in his evening clothes. Even the old man's angry eyes couldn't but note the contrast between the clean supple lines of this guest's figure, compared with the over-accentuated paunchiness of the other, who was leaning back in his chair, smugly eying his rival, and grinning like an overfed cat.

This recognition of physical strong points, however, didn't prevent the Potato King from taking immediate and violent exception to the younger man's wording of the apology. He quit laughing as abruptly as he had abandoned himself to it. Sitting upright and wiping his eyes, he demanded:

"You mean to insinuate that my money isn't clean enough for your confounded pocketbook?"

Fordier smilingly shook his head.

"You're getting the wrong impression entirely, Mr. Paull," he corrected. "It isn't the question of the quality of *your* money. It's simply a matter of my getting something I wanted for nothing. Or, at least, by the time the agreement is carried out to the letter, that is what it will amount to."

"You mean the lease, Andy, here, put over on you?" queried the old man, inclined to grin afresh.

"Yes, I mean the lease—but I'm of the opinion that McMasters, my agent, did

the 'putting over.' And *on* Mr. Belden's agent, an Oriental named Oshida." The smile which Belden had learned to hate to fury was turned on him.

"Sour grapes," he flung out in sneering denial.

Old Paull had heard enough, though, to be curious as to facts. The Potato King had not gained his crown through buying pigs in a poke.

"Just what were the terms of that lease?" he asked his man, thrusting a spade directly into the heart of the disputed "hill."

Belden reddened at the tone. He squirmed. He coughed uneasily. Fordier, seeing, understood and laughed.

"It may be possible, Mr. Paull, that Mr. Belden hasn't had time to read the terms carefully. For his information, as well as for yours, I'll sketch them for you: For the privilege of sluicing certain portions of the Mormon Channel, to which I possess a bona fide deed, a certain Oriental named Oshida, agreed to remove four feet of the bank the entire length of my property, dredge the channel to a depth of not less than eight feet, nor more than twelve, and to deposit the clean gravel only in such spots as I should designate. Which assures me of a swimming pond I've been planning, and the laying of a graveled roadway from my property to the highway."

Paull frowned and motioned the speaker to be reseated.

"I don't get the point yet," he observed, puzzled. "You say 'something for nothing.' Andy says the strike out there netted us seventy-five dollars yesterday afternoon."

"Beg pardon, Mr. Paull," interrupted Fordier, leaning forward earnestly, "but that isn't a strike."

"What's that?" exclaimed his inquisitor, reddening angrily. "You mean to sit there and tell me that when the whole town has been washing out gold in dishpans and what not out there, that it isn't a strike? I may be old," he concluded, righteously, "but, by golly, you can't put any such kid hokum over on me as that!"

"Nevertheless, it isn't a strike," maintained Fordier, unabashed. "I'm sorry for the white people who are risking their health in the mud and water out there—for what will gain them little. The yellow ones—they don't worry me. Mr. Paull, I knew what I was doing when I made the terms of that agreement. The idea that the Orientals would in the end have done the work I wanted done, for wages approximating those they would receive were they back in their own country—where they belong! —caused me to sign the agreement without the slightest compunction. It didn't worry me, that they could dredge from here to their own side of the globe, and in the end be paid little for their time, their energy, and their gasoline.

"You see, sir," he explained seriously, "there never has been pay dirt around here. This fluke doesn't mean an oversight on the part of the pioneers, who founded this town. It was located here in early days, not because of any local mines, but because it was on navigable water, contiguous to the mines of 'Jimtown', and others of Mariposa, Merced, Tuolomne, and Stanislaus counties. It was here the miners from the southern mining districts came to get supplies which were shipped inland from San Francisco by boat, as the cheapest mode of transportation. This was only about as much a mining locality as San Francisco. It was merely a supply depot, a distributing center. A place where the miners from the mountains and interior came when they wanted to taste civilization, and didn't care to go so far north as San Francisco for the privilege."

Belden moved impatiently. This was boring, and to him, utterly inapropos.

"Talk of something up to date," he cut in with a sneer. "Whether or not

they found the stuff around here in those dead-and-gone times, doesn't interest me, nor Mr. Paull, I imagine. What interests us, is the fact that the gold is out there now, and our dredger is getting it!"

Fordier glanced the other over with a smile as light seemingly, as the shadow of a passing dove, but which had all the effect on the recipient of a thousand-legged centipede hot-footing its way across his face.

"Yes?" was the provocative response. Before Belden could sputter an answer, Fordier continued: "Seventy-five dollars yesterday, I'm told. Something like fourteen to-day, however, I had on most excellent authority. And who can say as to to-morrow? Or do you propose to work on Sunday, Mr. Belden?—for I see that *you* are the principal sponsor for the activities out there!"

The annoying insousciance of the speaker coupled with the disconcerting information imparted, sent the heavier man wrathily into the sulks.

"What is it to you, if we work Sundays, or not?" he muttered sullenly.

"Oh, merely, that my roadway is rapidly being completed. If your dredger is kept in action to-morrow, I shall all the sooner have to look you up, Mr. Belden, to render due thanks to Cæsar!"

Old John Paull had heard all he could stand along this line.

"Look here," he said point-blank to Fordier, "if there's something phony about that dredging business, I want to know it—right now!" He fixed his eyes on the other with the sort of look that had sent many a man in his employ slumping in his chair.

This man didn't slump, though, but he did answer very gravely.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Paull, but there has been nothing phony about the dredging. I can truthfully say, however, that I wish that there were. The indisputable fact remains, though, that this Oshida, to whom the lease was assigned, has been operating the dredger according to the terms of the agreement since two-thirty yesterday afternoon. With the result, he's getting what gold there is, and I'm having my roadway laid, and my swimming pool deepened."

"If we're getting the gold, where's the joker?"

Old Paull was more puzzled than ever.

"The joker is, I'm afraid, that you have got about all the gold you're going to get, and the agreement reads four feet to be removed from the bank, and the pond deepened not less than eight feet—and it will take several days longer for the whole dredging crew to complete this."

XVI.

Old John Paull needed only one look at his daughter—whom he found gazing at one of the guests with all the fond surprise one would give to a lottery ticket, bought in good faith, thrown into the wastebasket, and then have it turn out a capital winner—to make him investigate into things to see if he was being bluffed with an empty gun, or if he had been led into a real holdup by one of his most trusted men.

Fordier's explanation left little chance of doubt that he knew whereof he was speaking.

"I'm not basing my assertions on guess work, Mr. Paull," he said. "To give you my credentials, as it were, first, my father—as you perhaps do *not* know wrote the most authentic and comprehensive history of pioneer California ever published. He didn't write it from his study in Berkeley. He actually visited the spots he touched upon. He interviewed old-timers, studied historic places, and gathered his data first-hand. I accompanied him on these tours of investigation as much as possible during vacations from school. This town was one that I visited with him. That was something like fifteen years ago. Among the spots to which he gave particular at-

tention while here, was the site of Rossita Grosjean's Fandango."

He turned to Peggy, to interpolate, "I'm telling you about her sooner than I thought, when we spoke of her on Monday."

Leaving her floundering in the shame of a jealousy so ridiculously founded, he went on, addressing himself directly to her father.

"Rossita was the daughter of a French restaurant keeper and a Spanish dancer. Ask any of the real old-timers of the early days what they remember of 'Frenchy' Grosjean's cooking, and Rossita Grosjean's beauty, if you want to hear a panegyric of 'Them's the good old days!' and I suppose, she *could* dance. Anyway, the miners appreciated what she gave them. They used to toss their pokes of gold dust about quite recklessly when they came in from the mines to Rossita Grosjean's Fandango. They showered her with gold after some of her dances. At such times, her servants would take brooms to sweep the dust up from the floor of the dance hall."

Belden was fidgeting in his chair again. To have to listen to this was like forcing a speed king to watch a bicycle race. When Fordier paused, he interposed with a sneer:

"Very interesting, no doubt, to those who care for such things as ancient history. But aren't you getting off of the subject, Mr. Fordier? We were talking of dredgers, not dancers, I believe." He laughed at the apparent keenness of this sally.

"Believe it or not, as you choose," retorted Fordier with a shrug. "But, I know that tongue-and-grooved flooring was not part of that fandango's construction, Mr. Belden. There were probably cracks in that floor big enough to grade beans through. Naturally, some of the gold was bound to get away from the brooms."

Belden's laugh died in his throat. A light as big as a harvest moon caused him to blink in the face of some awful possibilities that might be facts!

Old Paull's shrewd eyes divided a silent moment's scrutiny between the two men. A light that needed dimmers was also illuminating certain possibilities for him. He reached out for the box on the table, and fortified himself with a fresh little square of black.

"Where was that fandango located?" he asked, inviting and more than half expecting the worst.

"That cottonwood of mine out there on the channel, Mr. Paull, furnished the shade under which the kitchen girls of old Grosjean's ménage shelled peas, peeled potatoes, and ground the coffee beans for Frenchy's famous coffee, which has caused his name to live a half century after him—for he died in the early 'sixties. The dance hall proper was built on piles, adjoining his living quarters and restaurant. It made a convenient boat landing. The channel was navigable to the river then, you know."

Old Paull faced his business manager. The searchlight of his hard old eyes sent that gentleman to mopping a red brow with a travel-stained handkerchief.

Peggy, however, intervened. She knew that Samson was about to be showered by the débris of his temple of infallibility, and that before the earthquake hit, was the psychological moment for her to make claims to complete victory.

"It looks to me, like the Paulls needed somebody in the family who *remembered* his history," she said to her father, with remindful emphasis. With eyes shaming the radiance of the stars themselves, she added to the youngest of the three men, "I believe that somebody said there was a moon outside, Wayne. Let's go out on the terrace and enjoy it, while father and Mr. Belden decide whether they will work on *our* roadway to-morrow, or shut down the dredger until Monday!"

Her father didn't stop them. His name was John Paull, not John Paul Jones! *He knew when he was licked!* But you may believe his canceled-order as son-in-law enjoyed neither the feel of the plush box in his pocket, nor the words that were poured molten in his ears. He had the law laid down to him with complete thoroughness, and it was couched in words, it must be confessed, better suited to the decks of a mutinous whaler than to a millionaire's library.

The Get-Together Club

THE complete novel by Maxwell Smith, "Confession," which we published in the issue for November 10th, seems to have created more or less of a sensation.

It has been a long time since a single story has provoked so much discussion and so far there has been nothing but praise for it. Of course there's no telling what may come later; there's still a chance for some one to express his unqualified disapproval of it.

There has been one comment, to be sure, which contained a note of criticism, but even that carried a tribute to the author's skill in telling his story. In the course of a conversation with a visitor to our office the other day the subject of Maxwell Smith's novel came up and the gentleman remarked that there was a 50,000-word story that could have been told in 10,000 words and yet that he had become so absorbed in it that he read it through from beginning to end and that his interest had not flagged for an instant.

Well, what more does any one want than that? What difference does it make how many words there are in a story if you read them all without fatigue?

Naturally we thought it was a good story or we wouldn't have printed it. We even thought it was more than a good story—it seemed to us exceptionally good.

What impressed us more than anything else, however, was the fact that its theme was the commission of a murder and that there was no mystery as to the identity of the guilty party. To maintain the necessary suspense under such circumstances is something of an art and we think it must be admitted that Mr. Smith has kept his readers on the anxious seat without keeping them guessing. In other words he has scored a pronounced artistic success.

These letters have confirmed this opinion.

MONTPELIER, VT.
November 14, 1922.

Editor PEOPLE'S STORY MAGAZINE,
79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

DEAR SIR: I want to congratulate you on the complete novel in the last number of your magazine, "Confession," by Maxwell Smith. It is one of the very best stories that I have ever read without any exception. I say this in spite of the fact that there weren't any characters in the story that attracted me particularly. I couldn't help feeling some sympathy with Mrs. Dormley, of course, but after all she was kept so much in the background and there were so many other things going on that she had no hand in that, as I read it, I didn't have much time to think about her. I liked the district attorney because he wasn't the sort of man to be fooled and he knew enough to keep things to himself until the right time came. If you ask me I should say that it was the character of the district attorney that the whole story turned on and he was the one who made the story. But I don't pretend to know about such things and

somebody else's opinion may be better than mine.

But what difference does it make what the reason is? The story is a corker and that's all there is to it. Yours truly,

LEONARD PARKER.

OMAHA, NEB.
November 16, 1922.

PEOPLE'S STORY MAGAZINE,
79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

GENTLEMEN: How do you do it anyway? What I mean is, how do you manage to go on giving your readers the high-class fiction that you print in every issue of PEOPLE'S? You do that right along and then every once in a while you give us a story that beats the best you have published before.

Maxwell Smith's complete novel, "Confession," that appeared in your last number is what is making me write this letter now. Maybe you have had better stories than this and maybe other magazines have had better stories, but all I can say is that I don't remember them. I suppose I have read all the murder mystery stories that amount to anything and I have seen quite a few plays of that kind, but I never ran across anything just like "Confession."

I am no good at telling you why I like a story, and even if I did I don't know what sense there would be in doing it. All you want to know is whether you are giving your readers their money's worth, and I am just writing to tell you there's one anyway that thinks you are. Good luck to PEOPLE'S. Yours truly,

NATHAN TOMPKINS.

DAYTON, OHIO.
November 13th.

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION,
79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

GENTLEMEN: I know from experience what it means to get a little praise for a good piece of work, and so think it is only fair to send you a good word for Maxwell Smith's story in your November 10th number. And you can pass it on to him, for he is entitled to it as much as you are, or more.

It has been a long time since I have read a story in any magazine, or a book either, that kept me so interested all the way through it as "Confession" did. The characters were all so real and the things that they did were all so true to life that I could hardly help believing that I was reading about things that really happened to people that I knew. In a way it isn't exactly a pleasant story, but for all that it is one that you feel perfectly satisfied with when you have finished reading it, and it don't leave a bad taste in your mouth. Dormley certainly got what was coming to him.

But even if this wasn't so there was enough of a different sort in the magazine to make up for it, for example Mr. Hoover's story "Coyote's Meager Talents," and by the way that is the kind of animal story I like, if you call it an animal story.

I am glad to see you are running some railroad stories in PEOPLE'S. They are always interesting, especially if they are written by people who know as much about railroading as Mr. Trask.

I have only been reading PEOPLE'S a few months, but I can assure you that I am a regular reader from now on. And I don't miss a chance to tell other folks about it.

Yours truly, ARTHUR FOLLETT.

In addition to the pleasure we derive from the approval expressed in the foregoing letters—and they are representative of a considerable number we have received on the subject of Mr. Smith's story—we confess that they have given us something of a sense of relief. It seems to us that if our readers feel this way about a story like "Confession" our editorial burden is, to some degree at least, lightened.

Perhaps we are assuming too much in concluding, on the strength of these letters that, after all, we have only one thing, instead of many, to think about, namely, to give you people stories that will interest you. Some cynic may rise to remark that that, of itself, is enough of a job to keep magazine editors busy most of their time, considering the general quality of magazine stories. But we are not talking for the benefit of the cynics, we are addressing all of our readers, and among them there may be some who will ask what there is for a fiction editor to think about except the selection of stories that will interest his readers.

Strictly and accurately speaking, nothing, nothing at all; that's just the point we're trying to make. But edi-

tors, like others, are sometimes betrayed into the mistake of wandering after false gods, of losing their sense of proportion, of emphasizing the wrong things and slighting the right ones. He may suddenly discover that he has been debating with himself the question as to what the reading public wants and find himself wandering aimlessly in a maze of profitless speculation as to the relative values of mystery, adventure, romance, occultism, science, and pseudo-science, and all the rest of them, in fiction.

See how easy it is to miss the one best bet when one's attention is divided among a multiplicity of "sure shots." Then you can understand how the tension is relaxed when the discovery comes that the reading public wants an interesting story and nothing else, and that it really cares nothing about these other questions that have brought sleepless nights to the editor.

Simple enough! Oh, yes, but what is an interesting story? That question still remains to vex the editorial mind and some people will insist upon one standard and others upon another, and the result is another state of confusion.

But there is at least one thing to be remembered and that is that fiction is, above all things, designed for the entertainment and diversion of human beings, and, if it is to fulfill its purpose, it must be genuinely *human*.

And that is worth keeping in mind with every manuscript an editor reads.

Do we all do it?

You tell.

Here is another communication on the subject of "Confession" which we want to call attention to because it gives us an opportunity to make an announcement under conditions which will make it more significant than it could be as a mere advertisement.

Mr. Coe likes "Confession" so much that he is not satisfied with just one story by its author; he wants something else.

Well, we expect to have the pleasure of printing a great many more stories by Maxwell Smith. It is even possible that during the coming year we may print one in every number, though as to that we are making no promises.

At any rate we have a considerable number now, actually in our safe, and he is just finishing a long complete novel.

November 24, 1922.

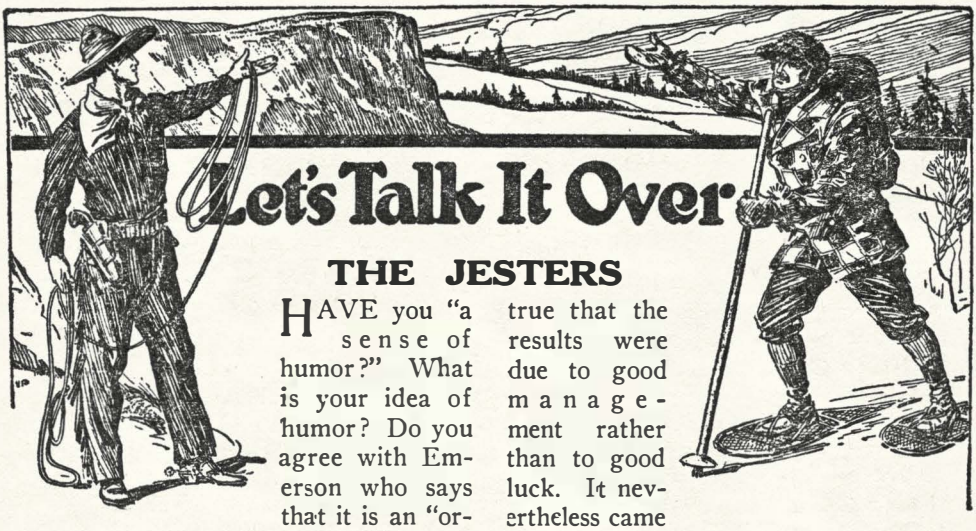
DEAR SIR: Allow me to express the pleasure that "Confession" in your November 10th issue gave me.

Without exception I regard it as the most absorbingly interesting magazine story I ever read. A remarkable feature is the breathless interest or expectancy that leads one on and on to the last word.

Want to read more of this author's writings. Yours truly,

CHARLES H. COE.

Washington, D. C.



Let's Talk It Over

THE JESTERS

HAVE you "a sense of humor?" What is your idea of humor? Do you agree with Emerson who says that it is an "ornament and safeguard," "genius itself" defending us from the insanities? Or do you think that Dryden was right when he said that an excess of humor led to "the follies and extravagances of bedlam?"

Apparently these two authorities flatly contradict each other; one says that humor saves us from insanity and the other says that it drives us to insanity.

It is more than likely that most of us, being Americans, will agree with Emerson, if for no other reason than because Americans are usually credited with having a sense of humor peculiarly our own.

It is hardly conceivable, however, that so keen an observer as Emerson, one gifted with so profound an insight into human nature, would have denied that there was some truth in Dryden's indictment.

There's an old saying that "there's no jesting with edge tools," and you will find in "The Jesters," one of the stories in this issue, some suggestions of the soundness of the saying. It is true that, in this story, the jest exactly served its purpose and with no unpleasant consequences to the jesters or to "the innocent bystander," and it is also true that the results were due to good management rather than to good luck. It nevertheless came very close to "jesting with edge tools." It comes pretty near falling into the class of so-called practical jokes, a form of pastime that is often as likely to end disastrously as to produce hilarity.

It has always been a question in our mind whether practical jokers have, actually, any genuine sense of humor. They are prompted, as a rule, by a desire to humiliate or ridicule some one else and to injure another, either in his self-esteem or in his body. It isn't even crude humor, because there's no such thing, since humor is a by-product of civilization. "A jest's prosperity lies in the ear of him that hears it, never in the tongue of him that makes it." A jest at the expense of an individual, if it is genuinely humorous, is something that even the victim *can* enjoy. If it is legitimate it may be all the funnier if he does not enjoy it.

Anyway, real humor is civilized; no man of the Stone Age ever got any further in it than practical joking.

In the story in this issue that we have referred to there is, at least, this to be said in justification of the jokers: They had a definite and a practical purpose to be served; and not only that, it was a useful purpose, inasmuch as it was designed to put out of business, permanently a thoroughly bad egg.

If You Were Dying To-night

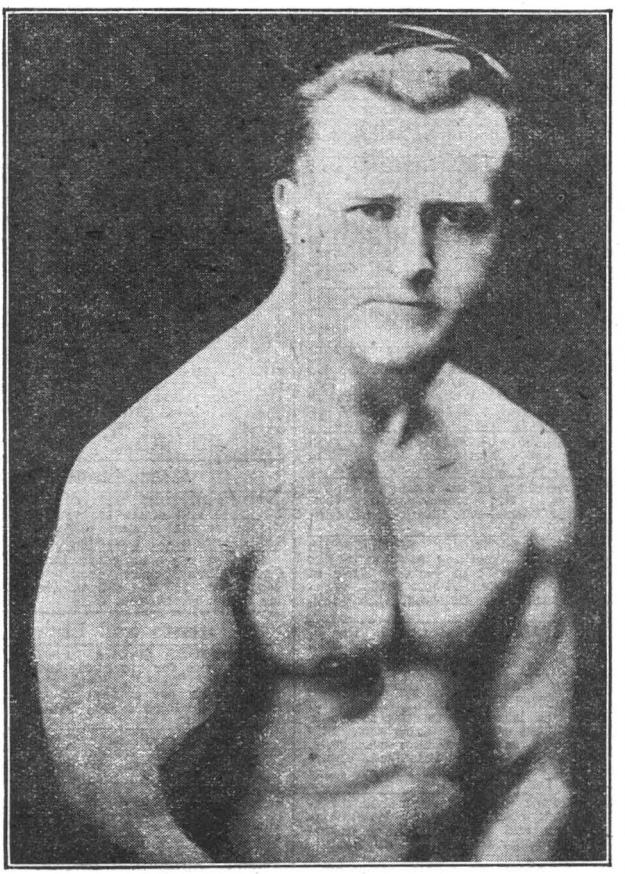
and I offered you something that would give you ten years more to live, would you take it? You'd grab it. Well fellows, I've got it, but don't wait till you're dying or it won't do you a bit of good. It will then be too late. Right now is the time. To-morrow or any day, some disease will get you and if you have not equipped yourself to fight it off, you're gone. I don't claim to cure disease. I am not a medical doctor, but I'll put you in such condition that the doctor will starve to death waiting for you to take sick. Can you imagine a mosquito trying to bite a brick wall? A fine chance.

A Re-built Man

I like to get the weak ones. I delight in getting hold of a man who has been turned down as hopeless by others. It's easy enough to finish a task that's more than half done. But give me the weak, sickly chap and watch him grow stronger. That's what I like. It's fun to me because I know I can do it and I like to give the other fellow the laugh. I don't just give you a veneer of muscle that looks good to others. I work on you both inside and out. I not only put big, massive arms and legs on you, but I build up those inner muscles that surround your vital organs. The kind that give you real pep and energy, the kind that fire you with ambition and the courage to tackle anything set before you.

All I Ask Is Ninety Days

Who says it takes years to get in shape? Show me the man who makes any such claims and I'll make him eat his words. I'll put one full inch on your arm in just 30 days. Yes, and two full inches on your chest in the same length of time. Meanwhile, I'm putting life and pep into your old back-bone. And from then on, just watch 'em grow. At the end of thirty days you won't know yourself. Your whole body will take on an entirely different appearance. But you've only started. Now comes the real works. I've only built my foundation. I want just 60 days more (90 in all) and you'll make those friends of yours who think they're strong look like something the cat dragged in.



Earle E. Liederman as he is to-day

A Real Man

When I'm through with you, you're a real man. The kind that can prove it. You will be able to do things that you had thought impossible. And the beauty of it is you keep on going. Your deep full chest breathes in rich pure air, stimulating your blood and making you just bubble over with vim and vitality. Your huge square shoulders and your massive muscular arms have that craving for the exercise of a regular he man. You have the flash to your eye and the pep to your step that will make you admired and sought after in both the business and social world.

This is no idle prattle, fellows. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Go ahead. I like it. I have already done this for thousands of others and my records are unchallenged. What I have done for them, I will do for you. Come then, for time flies and every day counts. Let this very day be the beginning of new life to you.

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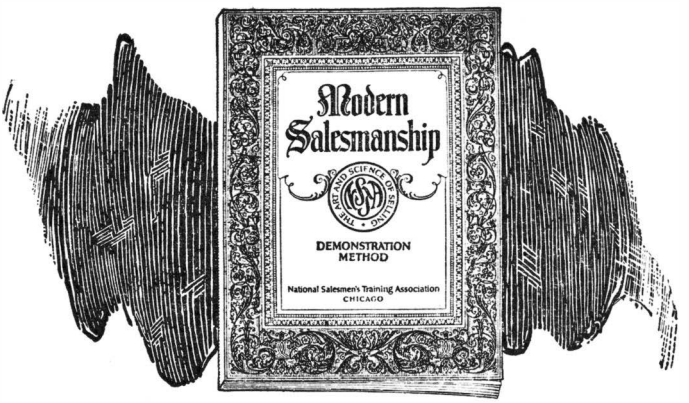


NOW FREE!

The Book That Has Shown Thousands the Way to Amazing Salary Increases

Do you want to leave the rut of routine work and start right out making more money than you ever dreamed possible? We have done exactly this for thousands of men. Here is the book which gave them their start. Read how it is now offered to you—FREE!

TAKE this situation: A man who had worked all his life in a routine job at low pay suddenly surprises his friends, by moving into a better neighborhood, taking a big house, buying a car and blossoming out as a well-to-do and influential citizen in his new community. How did he do it? What is the secret that he used? Simple enough. He knew that the biggest money in business is in Selling, and though he felt that he couldn't sell a thing, he suddenly learned the secrets that make Master Salesmen and then began to make big money.

If only one man had found inspiration enough in this remarkable book to jump to a sudden brilliant success in the Selling field—into a job paying him many times his former salary—then you might call it luck. But thousands have done it.

READ!

Charles Beery of Winterset, Iowa, stepped from $18 a week as a clerk to a position making him $1,000 the very first month. J. P. Overstreet of Denison, Texas, read this amazing book, left a job on the Capitol Police Force at a salary of less than $1,000 a year and in six weeks earned $1,800. F. Wynn, Portland, Ore., an ex-service man earned $554.37 in one week. Geo. W. Kearns of Oklahoma City found in this book a way to jump his earnings from $60.00 a month to $524.00 in two weeks, and C. W. Campbell learned from it how he could quit a clerking job on the railroad to earn $1,632 in thirty days.

Your One Chance to Make the Biggest Money of Your Life

Not one of the men whose names appear in the panel at left had ever sold a thing before—not a dime's worth. Yet every one of these men through reading this book discovered an amazingly easy way to jump suddenly from low pay to extraordinary earnings in the selling field.

Sounds remarkable, doesn't it? Yet there is nothing remarkable about it. There are certain ways to approach different types of prospects to get their undivided attention—certain ways to stimulate keen interest—certain ways to overcome objections, batter down prejudices, outwit competition and make the prospects act.

Simple as A B C

"Modern Salesmanship" tells exactly how the National Salesmen's Training Association will teach you these principles in your spare time at home.

As soon as you are qualified and ready, the Association's Employment Service helps you to select and secure a selling position as city or traveling salesman.

Now Free to Every Man Who Will Act at Once

We are not making any extravagant claims about what we will do for you. We don't have to. All of the amazing proof and many important features about Salesmanship are contained in our new salary-raising book, "Modern Salesmanship." It is yours—FREE. Send the coupon for it today. It will show you how you can quickly become a Master Salesman—a big money maker. It will tell you about the National Salesmen's Training Association system of Salesmanship training—about the National Demonstration method that gives you actual experience while studying—and all about the amazing opportunities that await you in the selling field.

This may be the one big chance of your life to leave forever behind you the low pay of a routine job for a sudden, brilliant success at a big salary.

Is it worth 2c to find out? Then mail this coupon NOW.

National Salesmen's Training Association
Dept. 4-A, Chicago, Illinois

National Salesmen's Training Association
Dept. 4-A, Chicago, Ill., U. S. A.

Please send me, without any obligation on my part, your free book, "Modern Salesmanship," and full information about the N. S. T. A. system of Salesmanship Training and Employment Service. Also a list showing lines of business with openings for salesmen.

Name.....

Street.....

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

Age.....Occupation.....

STANDARD LOADS of DU PONT SHOTGUN POWDERS

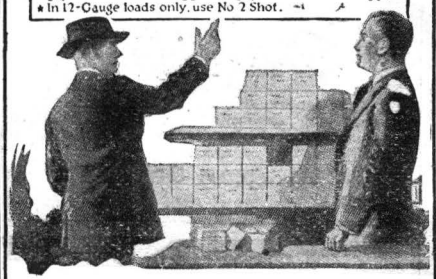
Kind of Game	12 GAUGE oz DRAMS	12 GAUGE oz SHOT	16 GAUGE oz DRAMS	16 GAUGE oz SHOT	20 GAUGE oz DRAMS	20 GAUGE oz SHOT	SHOT SIZES ALL GAUGES
	DUPONT (Bulk) SMOKELESS						
Turkey Geese	3½	1-⅛	2¾	1	2½	⅞	* 2 & 4
Brant Large Ducks	3¼	1-⅛	2¾	1	2½	⅞	4 in flight 0 over decoys
Medium Ducks Grouse Prairie Chicken	3¼	1-⅛	2½	1	2¼	¾	6
Squirrels Rabbits	3	1	2½	1	2¼	¾	6
Small Ducks Pheasants Pigeons Doves	3¼	1-⅛	2½	1	2¼	¾	7½
Quail Snipe Woodcock Shore Birds	3	1 or 1-⅛	2½	1	2¼	¾	8
Reed Birds	3	1	2½	1	2¼	¾	10
Trapshooting	3	1 ¼	2½	1	2¼	¾	7½

BALLISTITE (Dense) SMOKELESS

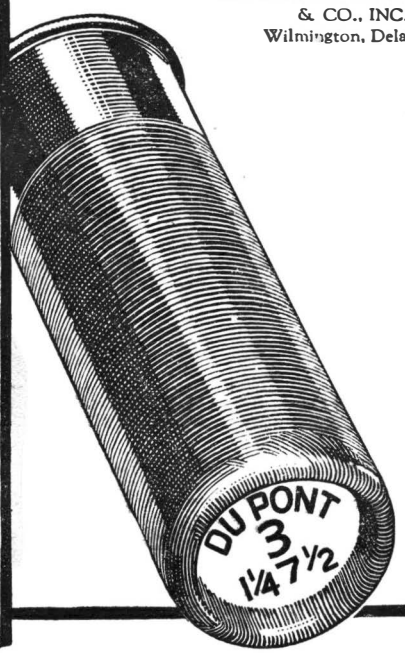
If BALLISTITE (*dense*) Powder is desired order by grains. A comparison follows of *Bulk* and *Dense* Loads

DRAMS	GRAINS	DRAMS	GRAINS
3½ equivalent to	28	2½ equivalent to	20
3¼ " "	26	2¼ " "	18
3 " "	24	2 " "	16
2¾ " "	22	1¾ " "	14

* In 12-Gauge loads only, use No 2 Shot.



Dealers everywhere carry these standard loads of du Pont Powders, because they have found that a great majority of their customers demand them.



Du Pont makes powder—not shells. Du Pont Powders are loaded in every brand of shell. The name "DUPONT" or "BALLISTITE", printed on the carton and the top shot wad, tells you what powder you are shooting. Specify the powder when you buy the shell.

E. I. DU PONT DE NEMOURS & CO., INC.
Wilmington, Delaware

We do not feel it necessary to "sell" any man on the quality of du Pont Powders. We do wish to point out that, to get du Pont safety, accuracy and reliability, you must find the name Du Pont or Ballistite on the top shot wad.

SHOOT DU PONT POWDERS

DU PONT

SALES records again show how strongly the public is predisposed in favor of the Hupmobile.

Our plans called for doubling our largest previous year by the end of this December. Instead—almost three months in advance of our plans—our market has doubled itself.

Between January 1 and October 17, when this is written, Hupmobile domestic sales reached a figure 100 per cent higher than the highest heretofore recorded for an entire year.

Tremendous as this growth has been, it is still short of satisfying the buying demand built up by 14 years of the faithful, saving service universally associated with the Hupmobile.

Please write us

For Winter Comfort

Let us send you our newest and most attractive booklet—"Beauty Land"—which explains the merits of Hinds Honey and Almond Cream. Simply mail a brief request to the A. S. Hinds Co. at Portland, Maine, and this pretty booklet will come to you in a few days.

If you'll just try this wonderful cream for some of the purposes described we are very sure you will soon give it preference, because that is what so many other nice looking ladies have been doing all these years past.

It is the purity and refinement and gratifying effect of Hinds Honey and Almond Cream that have gained for it such a remarkable nation-wide and world-wide patronage. It is good for everybody in your home,—grown-ups and kiddies. Father and brother like it after shaving and to keep their hands smooth and good looking. It prevents as well as heals the chapping.

HINDS WEEK-END BOX

makes a very useful gift and costs only 50c. postpaid, or at your dealer's. It contains those essentials for the comfort and attractiveness of the face and hands. Trial size, Hinds Honey and Almond Cream, Cold and Disappearing Cream, Soap, Talc and Face Powder.

As you hike along the windy street
Facing the blast of icy sleet
Chapped faces, hands and ankles too
And windburned skin may trouble you.

Then pause a bit upon your way
And take the Cre-Maids' tip today,
Just use Hinds Honey and Almond Cream
And meet the weather with joy supreme.

Frostbites, chilblains and kindred ills
Hinds quickly comforts, heals and stills.
Chapping and windburn pass away,
Soft lovely skin just comes to stay.

When the winds are raw and the cold extreme
You need Hinds Honey and Almond Cream.

WONDERFUL BASE FOR FACE POWDER

Hinds Honey and Almond Cream is now used for this purpose with marvelous success. Moisten the skin slightly with the cream, let it nearly dry, then dust on the powder. It will adhere to perfection.

AS A MANICURING AID THIS CREAM

softens the cuticle, prevents soreness and preserves the lustre of the nails.

All druggists and department stores sell Hinds Honey and Almond Cream. We will mail you a small sample for 2c or trial bottle for 6c. Ask your dealer for Hinds Superior Toilet Requisites, but if not obtainable, order of us. We send postpaid in the United States.

A. S. HINDS CO., Dept. 50, Portland, Maine