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The Popular Magazine

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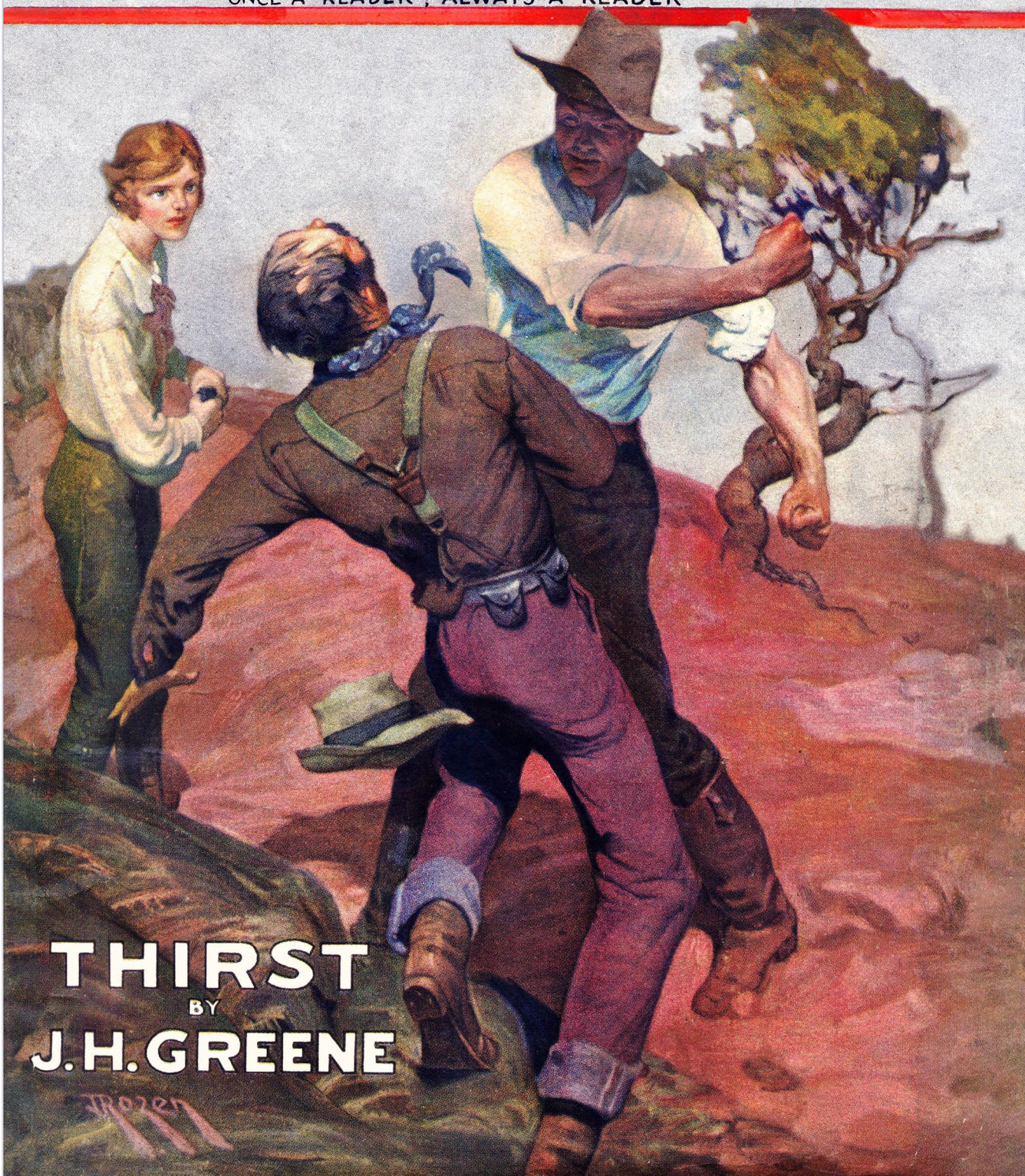

THIRST

BY

J. H. GREENE

"Out of the Blue," by Bertrand W. Sinclair, will be the leading feature in the next issue of THE POPULAR, on the news stands, July 7th. This is a complete book-length novel of the West as it is to-day. The story is so well done that we are glad to announce it with our heartiest recommendation.

Volume LXXXIV Number 5

TWICE-A-MONTH

The Popular Magazine

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THE POPULAR

VOL. LXXXIV JUNE 20, 1927 No. 5

Thirst

By J. H. Greene

Author of "Winning a Windjammer," "In the Poor-fish Navy," Etc.

Thirst—the white bones of men and animals on every desert waste in the world tell strikingly of the terrors of that word. There are other kinds of thirst, too, besides that for water—thirst for gold, for love. J. H. Greene tells here of an old prospector, a brave girl, and two young men, who started on a reckless expedition into the great Australian desert, and whose trail was dogged by the phantasm of Thirst in its full meaning.

CHAPTER I.

THE DOMAINERS.

AFTER passing the sixpence over the bar, the young man was served with a foaming pint. He imbibed the amber beer in prolonged sips, after the manner of his forbears, who drank ale for breakfast. That coin was his last in ready cash, and this drink was the prelude to a serious and sober discussion of himself with himself.

He then came out of the bar and, leaving behind the garish lights of George Street, headed for the grass and trees of the domain. Harry Edmunds wanted to think, and he was sufficiently bush bred to know the best way to think is to lie flat on one's back, resting on Mother Australia. The benches were occupied with lovers and loafers; Harry sought a tree. He found a red gum, whose long roots lifted the grassy earth sufficiently for a pillow; he lay down and looked up through the tufted foliage of a eucalyptus at the twinkling eyes of stars.

Other domainers were lying prone around him, some with trees, others without; the derelicts of Sydney were making their free beds under the branches. Turning his head, Harry could see the lights of the ferries crossing to Manly and the lights on the anchored ships; the chunk of paddles and the dropping of chains brought to him the call of the sea. But the rustle of the boughs overhead whispered of the bush, and he put his question to a large red star, periodically eclipsed by the brushing of the long arrow-headed gum leaves. That intermittent star reminded him of distant camp fires, welcoming a man coming in from a long tramp.

He was not so much undecided what to do; the question was where to do it. He had to get more sixpences, for he had put all he owned on The Flirt, for the cup. This favorite had been badly beaten by a rank outsider, and that night Harry, with thousands of others, was suffering for his trust in race horses.

But Harry was not at all mournful or depressed after his first curse at the luck. Of course, he had been foolish to give a lien on his garage, but his equally enthusiastic friends had mortgaged their pianos to put on the same horse. He was freed from prolonged money worry by his youth, his tough physical condition, his confidence that he could tackle any job that came along, and his native indifference to mere ill luck. Losing his business, he took as a tip from the Great Starter that he was to go on the Wallaby once more—where, he knew not, nor to what end; but he would go on the track, with his blanket on his shoulder, his billy in his hand, his tucker bag under his chin, and strike out back for something.

Having come to this conclusion, he lifted his head to look at those town lights that are anything but welcoming fires to men short of sixpences, when he became aware of somebody else sharing the other side of that gum tree. Instinctively his hand went to his pocket, when he remembered he had no change to be lifted. His pipe and tobacco were safe. He had not been asleep, because his boots were still on him, and his hat was still on his head. It is not safe for men with clothes as good as Harry's to sleep in the Domain. When the city lights grow dim, sleepers are apt to find themselves gagged and held, while being stripped. Skillful workers can remove a sleeper's boots without waking him.

Harry tugged his hat more tightly on his head and returned to his problem. A man can wander anywhere, but it must be somewhere, also. The map of New South Wales spread itself ghostily before his star-gazing eyes. Should he go boundary riding on some station, he asked the stars, or drive a car for some cocky farmer, or split timber, or take to the sugar country on the rivers? Perhaps he would go droving again; he was as easy in the saddle or on bareback as behind a steering wheel. He lit his pipe to consider droving, when he heard a stir from the other side of his tree.

"Could you oblige me with a match, old man?" asked a drawling voice.

THE questioner was on the dark side of the tree, but the voice was informative. The glow from the match, held to a burned-down brier, verified Harry's guess. That ragged mustache, that thin-cheeked, almost Roman-nosed profile surely indicated a Britisher down on his luck—a remittance man whose remittance had failed to arrive, or was not sufficient for his vices. The shaky hand holding the match and the face of a youngish man battered into middle age too early, surely told of vices.

"Better fill your pipe first," said Harry, passing the stranger his pouch.

The man took the pouch with bare thanks, filled his pipe, lit it, and was settling back upon the grass, while casually putting the pouch into his own pocket.

"I didn't say you could keep it, Pommy," said Harry, taking back his property.

"I beg your pardon. Fact is—I'm—I'm——"

"That's all right, man. I know how you feel."

The man twisted himself round to Harry.

"I'll be damned if you do. No man can know another man's hell."

"I don't care what's your particular hell, so long as you keep on your side of the bed," replied Harry tartly.

Harry had no desire to bandy words with a breed he detested. The tree was big enough to accommodate two men, who could rest back to back and easily ignore each other. On particularly hot nights these trees would serve many more, all lying with their heads against the ample trunk and their bodies radiating over the grasslike surface roots.

Harry's musings were again interrupted by a wandering figure that kept interposing between him and the nearest lamp-post, that of a man in a sloppy suit of gray tweed and a new slouch hat. As he wabbled uncertainly on over the grass, Harry saw that he was old, with a white beard that looked as if it had never been trimmed with anything but horse shears. Obviously he was a "bushy" from the back blocks, who had been imbibing too much of Sydney's liquor. The old fellow had trodden on one of the sleeping domainers, who had awakened and was apparently considering assault, with or without robbery, on the bushy. Harry arose from his tree and rescued the veteran.

"You come over to my tree and sleep it off, dad," he said, leading him by the arm.

"Thank yer, young fellow. I could have handled that chap but for some bad beer I drunk. There ain't no man, young or old, can give Jim Conroy lip. I kin take care of myself."

Harry was sure the old man was not bragging; the arm he held was as hard as that red-gum root he had been resting upon.

"Rottenest stuff I ever drunk. What's the matter with this town, anyway? Beer's bad; walking's bad; men bad," grumbled the old man, as he settled himself to his share of the trunk. Harry saw, now that the man faced the light, that he was not a puffy-faced farmer, but was gaunt, with high cheek bones and lean jaws under the bristling, thin beard.

"I ain't been in Sydney fer twenty years, and the place has the Barcoo rot. Can't walk a mile on these paving stones without my feet going. I came over here to tread grass to cool 'em. Can't drink a glass of beer or two without getting shickered. Then I get robbed into the bargain."

"Too bad," said Harry, sympathetically, but not without a subdued grin at the old back blocker for trusting himself to the Domain after dark.

" 'Tain't the money so much, but I'm losing faith in human nature. Nobody picks yer pocket where I come from. And bush beer makes ten miles like one. I've walked all the way from Port Darwin to the Eucla, on nothing but tea and damper and dried apples. Me trotters never failed. This town is a suicide camp—that's what it is, with their harbor to help yer. No wonder the morgue looks better'n a hotel."

THE old fellow continued his vigorous denunciations, lighting his pipe of villainous twist. Harry cut in with no remarks. Bush folk are silent as a rule, but once they let down the bars, their words are apt to run like creeks in flood time, so long as they are not questioned.

"You see, matey," continued Conroy, "I'm a prospector. I've stuck me pegs in every field of the last forty years. But the old days are gone; no more big rushes, with every man at least on tucker, hoping for the big slug on the next shovel o' dirt. All gone."

The old man's voice trailed off mournfully, and his small blue eyes, puckered with his patient searchings, blinked at the city lights.

"Yes, mining is about played out," echoed Harry, superficially judging the one industry he had never tackled.

"It ain't," said Conroy, loudly enough to startle any near sleeper. "Mining is never played out. It's the men wot get played out. The kind they breed in these yere towns. Too narrow in the chest, too short in the wind, too much white in their eyes, afraid to take a wall or a fence, shying at their shadows. Just foot-rotten colts, greedy for grub and ease. We want men in the bush. Men can always get gold and silver and copper and opals and a whole lot of new things not yet discovered. Men wot'll go where nobody's ever been and do wot no one

has ever done. I tell you Australia wants men."

His voice barked raucously over the Domain. Some of the sleepers sat up. It was rather late for the Domain orator or evangelist, but some cried "Alleluia;" others remarked, with somnolent blasphemy, that it was no use passing the plate on the night The Favorite had lost.

"I had a find—no matter where," continued Conroy, lowering his voice with a miner's caution in such matters. "My mate said it was a duffer and left me. He was a towny, too. But I stuck on and got a little. See here, matey."

Conroy felt inside his buttoned shirt and from a well-worn gold belt produced some ounce slugs of gold.

"Volcanic gold—not water worn from a reef. There! If yer know anything about gold, I've told yer where it came from—within a thousand miles. Well, it looked good, and I comes down to Sydney to get a swell outfit to work it. But d'ye think I got a bite? Not even with them slugs. No; I was grinned at. Told Mr. Fat Man was busy, and would I call next month, when he was back from home? I was treated wuss than a Chinaman's tailings and chucked out. Didn't have the right kind of clobber on. Should have a bell topper to see them mahogany-desk office miners. No; Australian mining ain't played out, but Australian mining men are. Then I gets robbed and sinks a shaft into bad beer."

Conroy carefully put back the gold and adjusted his shirt.

"How was it the thief didn't get the gold?" asked Harry.

"Oh, I kept my money in my pants pocket. I thought it was all right."

Harry chuckled at the old man's care of his gold and heedlessness over his money. Perhaps Conroy was right. The bush and its people were better. Perhaps The Favorite had been dosed or pulled, or some swindle arranged that could never happen on the little race courses out back.

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

"Sell this gold, buy a hatter's outfit, and go back. What I get will be all mine, then."

"Yes," said Harry, with a growing excitement that made his voice shake; "that's the advantage of being a hatter. But wouldn't you like trying a mate once more? I'm no capitalist. In fact, I'm near broke. Put all on The Flirt to-day, and you heard how she ran."

Harry was strangely stirred by the old man's story. It was like a race he had once seen when a horse had bolted after passing the post, thrown his jockey, and continued once more round the course. The horse had not been a winner, but did not seem to know it. Conroy was that kind of horse.

At Harry's question, however, the old man's eyes lost their desert-haunting expression and peered into Harry's, as if he were interrogating a bit of quartz.

"Ever been in the bush?" he asked.

"Nothing to brag about."

"Humph! Yer ain't a liar, anyway," grunted Conroy. "Every towny I've met thinks he's a bushman if he has gone fer a picnic in a wattle gully. Kin yer go all day on one pannikin of water?"

"I can do without beer to buy a ticket in a sweepstake," answered Harry impatiently. "If you want me, all right. If not, so long and good luck to yer, old man."

Conroy put his hand on Harry's sleeve. The two had risen from the grass.

"Don't buck out of yer saddle the moment I dig my heels in yer. I like yer. You're dinkum. But I got to be sure you'll stick and not turn home the moment we're short on tucker, like my last mate—that towny, Simpson."

"I'll stick just as long as you will. I've got nothing to come back to—no wife—no kids. I've got a few things yet I can sell, and I'm willing to back myself and you, old man."

Underneath Harry's recklessness and defiant independence glowed such admiration for the old man that it brought Conroy's big fist clasping his.

"Right-o, mate. Gimme a man the town has licked. We'll take the track to-morrow. Conroy and party, eh?"

The two men were shaking hands warmly, when a tall form emerged from the back of the red gum, and a languid voice addressed them:

"I beg your pardon. But could you make that party a trio?"

THE long, stooping Englishman, whom Harry had forgotten, appeared near the side of Conroy. Conroy let go of Harry's hand, gave a tug to his hat, buttoned his coat, and backed against the rugged bark of the gum in an attitude of defense—and offense.

"Two of yer after me bit of gold, eh? It'll take six of you townies to tackle Jim Conroy. Come on, damn yer! I'll show yer how an old man kangaroo-rips dogs."

Conroy was making passes with his knobbly fist; his toes were wriggling in his blucher boots; his very beard was bristling with pugnacity.

"Hold on, Jim! It's all right," laughed Harry.

"It is fer me!" said the old man, directing a vigorous kick at the midriff of the Englishman.

"How's that? I learned that from Frenchy, a convict from Noumea. Got some homemade punches, too, and got enough teeth for clinches."

Harry caught the edge of an equally hard and straight jab that brushed his ear. The sleepers in the Domain began to wake, this time with enjoyment at a fight. The policeman at a far corner was peering into the shadows of the trees.

"Jim," pleaded Harry, "don't be a fool. We're not thieves. At least, I'm not."

The Englishman laughed.

"Your correction was timely," he said. "Because I have been a thief for an hour. I wish to return your pocketbook which I took from you in the bar of the Rutland."

Conroy dropped his fist and cooled to amazement, as he took from the Englishman the stolen pocketbook.

"What did you take it for?" he asked.

"Why do we yield to temptation? I have never been able to solve the riddle of our love of evil. Of course, I'm broke, like the rest of us, but this is the first time I ever picked a pocket. Curious sensation—one more step down the ladder."

The airy impersonal manner of the Englishman annoyed Harry. That polished superiority was a pose; it was the kind of talk that certain men give to magistrates when in trouble.

"Shall I call that policeman?" asked Harry.

"No," answered Conroy, addressing Ludlow, the Englishman. "If you took my money 'cause you was broke, what did you give it back for?"

"Dicing with destiny, my dear fellow. I had been listening to your remarks about the harbor and the morgue. Perhaps, I, too, was suffering from bad beer. Remorse is mostly stomach. So I was wondering if you would take me on your expedition if I returned your money—minus the price of a few beers and a meal."

Conroy opened the pocketbook and saw that very little of his money was missing.

"If he goes with you, Jim, I don't," said Harry hotly.

"Steady, boy," said Conroy gravely. "The best mate I ever had was that French convict. How do you know I ain't done wuss things than stealing for grub? How do you know you won't do wuss yourself some day?"

The bleak pity in the veteran's voice silenced Harry.

"I see you know life, sir," continued the Englishman. "Should you decide to call that policeman, I will wait. But if not, let me tell you I have roughed it enough not to be classed as a greenhorn. I want to see your back country. I can trek, ride, mush, or whatever you call it. I won't pick your pocket out there, and I promise not to turn back. My one faculty is that I never turn back."

"You'll do," said Conroy, with a snap of his jaws. "Let's go and have a drink. You're the chap fer me."

THE three crossed the Domain; the Englishman introduced himself as Arthur Ludlow; Harry surlily gave his name, but not his hand.

"But you fellers has got to be mates," said Conroy, noticing the omission. "No sulks, boys. Of course you'll scrap, but have it out far from the camp, will yer, and then forget it. Fights mess up a camp so."

The old man's appeal was wise in its prescience, though almost childishly plaintive. Ludlow laughingly agreed.

"Of course, we'll quarrel; we're all men," he said. "I think the party is ideal. A mutually supporting and most unholy trinity. You, Jim, will supply the experience; I the deviltry; Harry the ethical fervor, without which no expedition is complete. Consult the records of our empire, which is built on Bible, bullets and bullheadedness."

Ludlow then went on to ask questions of Conroy, showing some knowledge of prospecting; despite his dislike, Harry found the fellow at least interesting. They came to a bar, where Ludlow certified the beer was good, and went into a back room, after calling for a map. The map did not come as quickly as the beer, and Ludlow went out to see if the landlord could supply it.

"Some younger son gone to seed——" began Harry.

"Never mind what he was," said Conroy, cutting him short. "It doesn't matter where we're going. Them kind turn out well sometimes. Just as good as convicts."

"Cards or women," guessed Harry, glancing after Ludlow, who was leaning over the outer bar and putting his demand to the pretty girl at the beer pulls. "Women, I'll bet."

"What if it is?" said Conroy. "There ain't no women round Jarvey's Soak, except black gins. It was a woman fust drove me to carry a swag, and I ain't never regretted it."

The Englishman returned with the map; Conroy indicated a large, vague area unmarked with names, south of the Macdonnel Ranges. An argument immediately arose concerning equipment. Conroy wanted to buy pack horses; Ludlow suggested camels, which he said he knew how to handle, from compaigning in Palestine. The expedition was in better funds, now that Conroy had recovered his money, and Ludlow said he might succeed in borrowing from some of his friends, if they thought there was no possibility of his ever coming back. But Conroy did not like camels, despite their value on dry stages. He had never seen camels handled by any but Afghans, and he was not going to take an Abdulah along, for the nasty, sprawling, smelling beasts. Harry, who had been silent, broke in with a suggestion of buying a car. He secured a paper from the bar, showing the record made by a car crossing the Nullabor Plains only last week. The twelve hundred miles done in less than four days impressed Conroy.

"It will be faster than horses or camels," urged Harry, "and won't eat when it's not going. We can buy one in Broken Hill, and I'll fix up extra oil and water tanks and drive it."

Ludlow accepted the suggestion with a warmth that made Harry like him. Conroy was persuaded when Harry gave him figures and once more displayed that tire advertisement and photographs of the journey. Conroy and party were committed to buying a car.

It was closing time when the three came out into the street, not too hilarious for the laxities of Cup night.

"Where shall we take you?" asked Harry of Conroy, when they awoke to the fact that they were in Sydney, not Golconda.

"Dunno," answered Conroy vaguely, looking up an old street rising toward Darlinghurst. "Boys, I dunno where we are, or where I live."

The old track finder was bushed in Sydney. Ludlow's address was the Domain at any tree he could find, he said. Harry offered them shake-downs in his shop, a few streets off in Wooloomooloo.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE BILLABONG.

CONROY insisted on getting out of the car and walking the last ten miles to the water hole at Marinna Springs. The road was a straight cattle track, but raddled with rabbit holes. The bumps and jars were tiring him.

"Some of us has to keep our legs in training," he said, as his feet gratefully touched the earth. "That bucking kerosene car may blow up some time, and legs will come in handy. I'll hit the billabong an hour after sundown."

They left the old man cheerily trudg-

ing after them in their dust, but soon lost sight of him. Old grass had crept over the track, and the holes became more frequent. Harry had to drive carefully to save his springs, loaded down with supplies, tools, and extra tanks on the running boards. They sighted the wired fences of Marinna Station when the setting sun was burning on the mulga clumps and fence posts. But the track divided, and the two men hesitated which branch to take. Conroy had said nothing about this fork.

Ludlow wanted to seek out the station homestead, but Harry pointed out they did not know where the slip rails were—that the homestead might be miles away; besides, he reminded Ludlow, they had to pick up Conroy.

"These stations aren't like your little English parks, Luddy," he remarked.

So far the men had not openly quarreled, but little antagonisms were perpetually arising.

The sun dipped into hot, purple clouds. A curlew wailed somewhere, and a few dingoes barked from the distance. Rabbits driven from their burrows by the panting motor scampered on all sides. They noticed dust rising to the north. Ludlow thought it was smoke, but Harry pointed out there was nothing to burn, for the grass was too thin for even a grass fire. The cloud came nearer, and, as the dust fell, a man appeared urging a very thin, stale horse.

"Which is the track to the billabong?" called Harry.

"On your right. Can you spare us a bag of water? We got a mob of sheep back there. Hope to get them to the billabong by morning. Ain't got Buckley's chance, unless there's dew."

He and his mates were trying to get twelve hundred sheep down to Adelaide. They had come from the north; the country was dry, and they had lost three hundred already, he added.

As Harry was filling the man's water bag, the nose of his lean horse shoved forward and began licking the drippings.

"I can spare your horse half a bucket," said Harry to the drover.

"Thanks. Didn't like to ask yer. Heading south?"

"No, west; prospecting."

"Gold help yer! The bloody country's dry as an ant hill."

The drover cantered off; Harry looked along the darkening track; Conroy could not possibly come up to them for some hours. He wanted to see those perishing sheep.

"If it was cattle, they would have scented the billabong, but sheep are stupid," he said. "I've seen thirsty sheep standing in water holes and having to be ducked before they would drink. Let's drive over and look at them. We'll have time before Conroy gets here."

Ludlow grumbled and found fault with Harry for giving away so much water. Now, there was nothing penurious or careful about Ludlow; he was merely assuming a virtue out of a desire to criticize Harry. Harry, after saying he could refill the bag at the billabong, jumped back into the car.

Ludlow followed, still giving his patronizing advice:

"It's each man for himself on an expedition like this, Harry. We're not a traveling humane society. Make a note of that, my lad."

"I'm not taking notes just now, Luddy," replied Harry, as he turned the car, and his headlights caught the pale green of the salt bush and the vanishing white tails of rabbits. "If you're worried about that water, I'll dock myself a cup of tea every meal till we make it up."

Harry drove on without further words. He decided the only way to handle Ludlow was to keep a tight rein on his temper. Ludlow was not the man to have a friendly bout with, which would settle an argument, because Ludlow's arguments never were settled.

THEY ran into the mob after a little over a mile, twelve hundred sheep prone in the dust, their wool thick with dust, some bleating pitifully, some too tired to bleat, some already beyond bleating. Dogs equally tired came up to the car, barking with throats that had been barking over a thousand hot miles. Harry circled round the mob to approach the drovers' camp fire. As he approached

it, a sharp shot rang out above the slow pounding of the motor.

"Just had to shoot one of our horses," said the drover who had ridden over to them at the fork. "Too old for dry stages, and the poor prad was gasping worse than your engines."

Harry saw four gray legs kicking with fading energy back of the fire; the other horses beyond were watching with dust-rimmed eyes the slaughter of their mate.

"Why didn't you give him a chance?" said Ludlow.

"I've been droving for ten years, mister, and I know when a horse is done," said the drover.

Harry said nothing; these men, lean as slabs, who had driven the sheep over dry stages all the way from the Queensland border, were keener horse lovers than Ludlow or even himself; they knew better than Ludlow how to obey the dice of necessity. He was too preoccupied with the sheep to pay any attention to Ludlow; those bleating hillocks of misery called to his pity and at the same time annoyed him.

"If they'd been cattle, they'd have rushed my water tanks and gored at me. But sheep! Poor, thick-headed jumbucks!" he said, getting back into the car.

The drover wanted them to stay and share his lamb chops. Neither Harry nor Ludlow felt like eating lamb just then, and, besides, they did not want to miss Conroy.

"Hope you come through, old man," he said to the drover.

"Thanks. Same to you. We'll be lucky if we have a thousand of them on their feet in the morning, unless there's dew."

He held his hand out flat.

"Not a drop. Not likely with them clouds. So long, mates."

Harry drove back to the fork, where he kept his headlights on to guide Conroy, who soon swung into their glare, with long, comfortable, easy strides of a man who walks for distance and not for speed.

Conroy took the back of the car without a word. Both knew better than to ask him how he felt. Conroy always felt well, except when asked that question. Harry said nothing about the sheep until they reached the billabong, after a mile's drive by the wire-protected station fence.

The headlights picked out a dark level of scummy water, but Harry put on his brakes when his wheels crunched in what he had taken for a rise in the dust. Fearful of his tires, he got out and saw he had run over a dead sheep, picked to the very bones and wool by the crows. Standing in the dark away from his lights, he saw the billabong—a shallow, muddy pool, packed to its center with the bodies of sheep that had rushed it. The bodies were piled two deep; the sheep had trampled one another into the mud and under the water; the billabong had been a hecatomb; that mob, which he and Ludlow had seen back in the road, were facing a similar fate.

Harry wanted to drive back to warn those drovers how little water was in the billabong they were relying upon; Ludlow wanted to camp; Conroy did not care.

"They have no business trying to raise stock out here. Stock dries up a country," Harry said. "Let's camp."

THEY drove away from that fetid pool and the buzzing flies swarming in their lights, built their fire in the mulga, and prepared tea.

"Anyway," said Conroy, after he had dispatched a meal he had earned by his walking, "any drover who doesn't know enough to ride ahead and prospect his water holes deserves to lose his sheep."

He then rolled out his blanket, curled himself up in it, and slept.

"Not much of the good Samaritan about him," remarked Ludlow, as he prepared to do the same. "But I don't see why we didn't drive on to the station. There's time enough to start roughing it when we have to. We'd have had a bed and a civilized meal."

"You're thinking of Pat Laughlin's whisky. Well, I could do a nip myself, but Conroy says no."

Ludlow scowled at the old man, who had removed his boots only, and covered his face after making a pillow of his

coat. Conroy had refused to allow any liquor to be taken in the car, not so much from temperance principles, as from the need of traveling light. Conroy abstained while getting his gold and compensated his thirst when he had sold the gold. But, as the getting generally took twenty times as long as the spending, Conroy could be classed as rather a temperate man.

Harry found it hard to sleep; the bleating of those thirsty sheep and the shot that had killed the horse were in his ears, and he kept seeing that mob in the mud of the billabong. He kept waking up, looking at the thin clouds that veiled the moon and shut off the dew, asking why the water in them had to scurry away so fast—why it did not rain. He kept putting out his hand even in his sleep to feel the stones and the bushes of the mulga. Everything was still dry; not a drop of dew had fallen.

Near morning, when the moon had sunk, he arose quietly so as not to disturb the others, determined to walk back and warn the drovers away from that billabong. The drovers had not ridden over; they must have counted on it being full; they would have to try and get their sheep to some other water hole.

He walked past the billabong, its dead sheep, its noisy flies, startling things that flew out of the mulga—crows, probably, waiting for the morning to resume their feastings. Though he had slept little, the exhilaration of the early dawn was coming to him; he stepped out sharply, ready for what it would bring.

This station was the last they would pass; they were going into the comparatively untrodden wastes of central Australia. There were no stations, no stock routes over that barren country. Harry was about to go where there was no bush. His swag-carrying tramps back east with stations, towns and settlers every few miles were child's play to this trip. Though all that country had been crossed by explorers and prospectors, from Adelaide to Perth, from Port Darwin to the Bight, the tracks of those men, if not blown out by the winds or hidden with sand, were mere spider lines on the immense blank incognita of the maps. Conroy would take him where men had never been; he would gaze on country white men had never looked upon.

Somewhere back of those fences was the comfortable, perhaps luxurious, homestead of Pat Laughlin. Harry had worked on such stations in the Downs and the Riverina; he knew they could be almost palatial oases of culture, with their books, their pictures, their grand pianos, their gracious women and sturdy children. The wool and cattle kings knew how to live. But all the same, he was glad his party had not put up at Marinna; he wanted to begin battling with the desert at once. He was turning away from the fence, thinking he could make quicker time to the drovers' camp by cutting across the salt bush when he heard strange sounds inside the fence. At first he thought it was a bird of some kind; it was like the cawing of crows, yet different; it was not the weird note of the mopoke nor the guttural chuckle of kookaburras; besides, it was still too dark for birds to be calling. Leaning on the upper rail of the fence, he caught the flicker of blue lights below him, where the ground sloped down into a hollow. The ridge beyond was crested with trees, their branches entangling the low stars. Suddenly he knew he was gazing at the reflections of those stars in a pool and listening to the croaking of frogs.

HE vaulted the fence; the top rail broke; he bounced off the rabbit-proof wire, rolled over the boundary rider's track inside, and then on the lush grass saved from the rabbits. He picked himself up and ran down that gully. The frogs ceased croaking at his steps. A very firmament of stars spread at his feet—elongated glitters on the ripples of a wide sheet of water—one of the dams of Marinna.

He tasted the water; it was cool and clean, if somewhat tasting of clay. Here was water enough for mobs ten times the size of that one thirsting back on the track; water, which those stupid jumbucks could not even smell—could not even be led to for want of dew to tempt their tongues. Harry listened to the frogs that had started up again when he

was still; their caws began far up the banks of the dam and crept nearer, till they croaked under his feet; one splashed into the water, and the splash cleared Harry's thinking into action.

In a few minutes he was back at the camp and careless of everything and everybody was noisily cranking up the car. Over the wild whir of birds of prey that had been slumbering in the mulga, the yapping of dingoes that had been creeping up on the carcasses at the billabong, arose the startled inquiries of Ludlow and Conroy.

"You can get the breakfast, Luddy," called Harry, as he drove off. "I'm going to save those sheep."

THE dawn was flooding the east with its first pink of a coming hot day, as Harry pushed over the salt bush, careless of punctures, heedless of broken springs. The drovers were stirring about their fire, preparing for a day of disaster to their sheep.

Harry explained his plan.

"You say the fence is down?" asked the head drover.

"Yes; I——"

"Never mind how. I don't want old Pat charging me with breaking his fences. But look at those jumbucks. How are you going to get them on their legs?"

He waved a disconsolate hand to those weary heaps of dusty wool. The morning was noisy with crows and filled with the odors of live sheep.

"If we only had dew the blankards would move," cursed the drover.

"Don't you see I'm providing the dew?"

The drovers now caught the full force of Harry's idea and started to round up their dogs and mount their horses. The head drover rode on the riding board of Harry's car, the one that carried the extra water tank, while Harry drove the car slowly along the front lines of the sheep. The drover began scattering water in their faces. A big wether was the first to rise; others followed. Harry turned the car toward the dam, and the drover kept sprinkling in front of the gradually quickening mob; the dogs and the mounted men helped to guide and speed the reanimated sheep. A few did not rise and were soon covered by the black wings of the crows, except when these were scared off by the gray swoop of eagles.

"Only the rail's down! The wire ain't," cried a drover, as the sheep surged round the car at the impasse of the wire.

Harry hopped out of the car, having to kick his way through the sheep, after he had reached into his tool chest.

"The wire's down, too," he called to the horsemen back of the mob. Harry slipped his pliers back into his pocket, as the sheep scampered down toward that cool sheet of water, now gleaming in the dawn. The clay banks were wide enough to prevent their crowding; there was water enough to tempt them to spread; those that were sated crept out and began feeding on the rich grass of a well-kept station.

"By hell, Jim Barton, you'll pay for this!" barked a voice.

Harry saw a whiskered man who had ridden up by the fence track, denouncing the trespassing drovers. He hurried up from the dam, where he had come on foot to watch the sheep water.

"Your fences were down, and my sheep were dying. My boss can pay for the water, Mr. Macloed," the drover was saying.

"We're not selling water. We've just enough for our own stock, and——"

The whiskered man was closely eying the gap in the fence from his saddle.

"That wire has been cut. It's jail for you, my laddie. Get your damn jumbucks off our grass. Wait till I get the boss after you."

Conroy, who with Ludlow had now come up to the fence, guided by the shouts of the drovers and the barking of the dogs, interposed. Conroy's sympathies were entirely with the men of the open track; this middle-aged station manager with his office manners and ink on his fingers was to Conroy a fussy excrescence on a free country.

"If Pat Laughlin won't water them sheep," he said, "he ain't the Pat Laughlin I knew. Besides, the fences were down, and when you ain't got no pegs in,

you have no claim to nothin'. I'll talk to Pat, meself."

The man he had been addressing sagged in his saddle and dropped his threatening fist.

"Pat Laughlin," said Macloed, softening to his native Aberdeen. "Haven't ye hear-r-d? Pat died a month ago."

The news that the master of Marinna had passed to the great mustering checked Conroy's indignation.

"Poor old Pat," he murmured. "Don't see how he could die. We was mates once, 'fore he went squatting. Poor Pat!"

Macloed began to look suspiciously at this grief of an old man, just off sleeping on the ground, with dry grass in his hair and twigs in his beard. Some old swaggie, he judged, eager to claim the station hospitality on the strength of an imaginary mateship with its late owner.

"Lucky for you he is dead," snapped Macloed. "It would be fists and stock whips to you thieves, if he was alive. Here's the boss now."

Harry had been about to break into the argument to extricate the drovers from this breach of pastoralist law and, if he could, save himself. That cutting of the wire was certainly criminal. A squatting magistrate in a dry season would not be tender to such an offense. Harry's thirst for desert adventure might have to be satisfied with the loneliness of the nearest jail.

BUT his perplexity was diverted by the feathery gallop of hoofs on turf, and he forgot all fear of the law at the splendid action of a black mare racing down the rise beyond the dam. She had a star on her forehead and a white stocking on her near forefoot; there was thoroughbred in her by the way she began climbing the rise to the fences, with no change of pace or reach, ready to leap a fence as easily as she took the channel that fed the dam. She reminded him of The Flirt he had backed so disastrously; that was the way The Flirt should have run at Flemington.

"Broke our fences, cut our wire, stole our water, and ate our grass. I say jail, Mara," began the manager, as the mare reached them.

So far Harry had hardly noticed the rider of that splendid mare. She needed no riding; no touch of a spur was required from those English riding boots, and the silver-mounted whip, which Harry was faintly aware of, had never been dropped to her flanks. Now, at the words of the manager, at the strange name, Harry lifted his eyes to the rider. Mara was the name of a girl in a khaki riding suit—a girl as bright as the morning, as open-eyed as midday. She sat that high-spirited plunging mare, as if she had been cradled in the saddle. She greeted the strangers in a caroling voice that had that soft quality the opera houses of the world have recognized as Australian, though her mouth took on the hardness of a horsewoman, as she reined in the mare.

"Mara?" said Conroy, somewhat bewildered. "Are you little Mara Laughlin I used to bring opals to? I'm Jim Conroy."

The girl was out of her saddle in an instant. Harry stepped forward to hold the mare.

"Leave her be," she said smilingly to Harry. "She won't stir, and she won't let any one but me hold her. Thanks, just the same."

She greeted Conroy warmly and introduced Macloed, her manager, while Conroy did the same for Harry and Ludlow and briefly explained their presence at Marinna. Macloed took up his complaint against the drovers; the girl listened rather impatiently.

"You mustn't mind Donald," she said to Conroy. "He's more anxious about my interests than I am."

"Lass, I've need to be," said Macloed. "We've had two dry seasons, and maybe another's coming. Wool is down, and the banks are tight. If you're letting every drover break your fences and drain your dams——"

The girl looked perplexed; beyond her fences were the drought-stricken plains; hopping in and out of the bare mulga clumps were the crows. She shuddered a little; they looked like the motes that swim before the eyes of falling men. Men as well as stock were liable to fail on those dry, wide miles.

"You're in duty bound to prosecute those men," pronounced Macloed.

"Those men did not break down your fence, Miss Laughlin," said Harry. "I did. I brought the sheep here with my car."

The girl looked incredulously from the car to the mob now spread out and feeding contentedly on her grass. As a station-bred girl, she could reckon their number at a glance.

"You carried a thousand sheep in that car?" she asked, in utter bewilderment.

"Not carried, Miss Laughlin. I just —I just——"

The drovers backed up Harry's limp explanation with a fervid and luridly pictorial account of how Harry had led the thirsting sheep to water.

"'I'll make the blasted dew,' he says, miss, and he done it," went on the enthusiastic drover. "I've heard of rain makers among blacks, but never dew makers. Here was we all praying for dew —it seemed too much to ask for rain— and he comes——"

"That's all right, boys. Take all the grass and water you want and get along. No charge," decided the girl, remounting her mare hurriedly, to avoid laughing at the drover. A flood of amused feeling was adding carmine to her tan. Once in the saddle, she regained her composure; she was the boss of Marinna and Pat Laughlin's daughter.

"It's all right, Don," she said to Macloed. "We've learned a new wrinkle. We must take watering carts with our mobs, or, at least, a garden hose. Jim, bring your friends up to the homestead for breakfast. I'll go ahead and prepare Wong."

SHE turned the mare and galloped down the hollow to the dam; she swerved wide, to avoid startling the sheep from their breakfasts, and the mare disappeared among the timber, in one black flash of speed.

"She's a wonder," murmured Harry.

"I say—I say!"

For the first time Harry found Ludlow inarticulate; he was stammering, and his raffish, dissipated face had lost its hard tracings of scorn.

"I should say so," continued Harry. "I'd like to train her for the Cup."

The Englishman, who had been leaning on Harry's shoulder, with an almost schoolboy familiarity, broke away, with one of his snarling oaths, and was about to say more, till he looked at Harry and had insight enough to guess that the Australian was only covering an admiration for the girl equal to his own.

"At any rate," he declared diabolically, "we start with the same handicap. We are both thieves now."

"I only stole for the sheep."

"I only steal for myself," said Ludlow savagely, as he tramped off to their camp.

Harry, too occupied with that wonderful mare and her lovely rider, did not waste words on Ludlow. He cranked up the car, but was some time in starting, for Conroy, as a prudent general, was getting all the information he could from the drovers about the state of the country. They had not come from the west, but from the north; the rumors they had heard of the west, however, were bad. The wardens on the far fields had been limiting the number of teams allowed on the tracks, to conserve the water, and many tales of perishing men had been reported.

"Luddy will want to get a job at the station," said Harry, after they had parted from the drovers, who bade them good luck with a pity that belied their hope.

"Let him," replied Conroy. "Misses his whisky and soda, I suppose. Lucky if he gets a pint of water a day, though those men are wrong. There's always water at the soaks, if you wait long enough for it to come through."

"It's not the drink, Jim. It's that girl."

"Well, it won't do him much good if he does stay. Mara is going to marry Macloed next year. He told me."

Harry inadvertently jammed down his brakes.

"Why not?" asked Conroy. "She's Pat Laughlin's gal, rides like him, bosses like him, regular wild, out-back brumbie, except for her eddication. She'll need a hobble like that Scotchman, if she don't want to ruin Marinna. She ain't chucked

a halter over your head, too, has she? You ain't going to leave me, too, are yer?"

Harry could not mask his feeling with Conroy, as he had with Ludlow. The old digger had a ferocious way of extracting frankness.

"If I had a station to match hers, Jim," he said, as he drove the car up to where they had turned into the mulga to camp, "I'd be inclined to enter against the Scotchman. She's dinkum, all right. But I'm broke, and I'm going with you."

"That's the way to talk," grunted Conroy. "You'll make a better prospector because you missed a fine gal. I'll be damned if Luddy ain't shaving! 'Tain't Sunday."

Now at the camp they beheld Ludlow scraping his lathered face with the guidance of a pocket mirror, stuck on a branch; on the brush beside him was a clean shirt, quite out of place in a prospector's kit bag.

"Told you so, Jim," laughed Harry. "Luddy thinks he has found his reward claim at Marinna. When I go after a girl, I'll pop the question in my working clothes and last-week's whiskers. No first aid from tailors and barbers for me."

Harry and Conroy went on packing the bedding and cooking kit, while Ludlow silently continued his shaving. They bantered the Englishman with the elemental jests of men close to the earth.

"He's got you licked in style, and he's from home, Harry," remarked Conroy, when Ludlow's silk shirt, smooth face, and the usual homelander's confidence at being properly dressed struck the rather soiled Australians.

"You said she was going to marry Macloed, didn't you, Jim?"

"That, of course, is the obvious intention—of Macloed, at least," replied Ludlow.

Harry was nettled by Ludlow's superior social perception; he had guessed nothing from Macloed's air of proprietorship over the girl; he had seen nothing but Mara and her mare.

"Remittance man restores his ancestral home by marrying wealthy squatter's daughter. *Times* please copy," burlesqued Harry, with that old bitterness of the native-born man for the man from England. Ludlow's face lost its impassivity.

"Damn you, Edmunds," he said. "I can't let you say that. It's not her money."

"Don't fight before breakfast, boys," pleaded Conroy, for the Englishman was white with anger, and Harry would not stand being cursed.

"He won't fight in that shirt, Jim," jeered Harry, thinking the time had come for a show-down and wanting it over.

"I can take it off, sir," quietly said Ludlow, slipping the shirt off and placing it carefully on a seat of the car. The man displayed the remains of a splendid muscular development, but he did not lift his hands. Only his voice grew strained.

"I resent your implications that my feelings are mercenary. I once married for money," he said with a gulp, as though the confession was strangling him. "But I never repeat my mistakes. I must ask you to apologize to me and to her. Ye gods! How can a man think of money and her?"

In some way Harry could not understand Ludlow's ardor put him in the wrong; it might only be a polished pose, but it was enough to prevent Harry from guarding.

"I will fight for her when that is necessary," continued Ludlow. "I want to marry her, and so, of course, do you."

The Englishman had got under Harry's guard by his actual downrightness. A natural shyness had kept Harry from barely admitting his feelings to himself; Conroy had forced a frankness from him; but he was tongue-tied now because of the sentimental emotions of an untried man.

"The man who doesn't want to marry her is blind to beauty," continued Ludlow; "hopelessly unresponsive, duller than clay, deader than that landscape! And she grew out of it! Think of that! Now I can believe in miracles."

He began putting on his shirt again.

Conroy was urging them not to keep Mara waiting, and Harry was soon driving the car along the track till he found the slip rails to Marinna. These were

half an hour's drive from the camp. Ludlow said nothing, as they drove for an hour up a fine road, past paddocks well stocked with full-fleeced merinos—paddocks with horses, more dams, and a drill in a gully, trying to bore for artesian water.

"You're right, Harry, old top," he said almost genially, when the wide verandas of the homestead gleamed out of a cluster of gums on a knoll. "It's more than a park—it's a principality."

Whether Ludlow was a mere fortune hunter or really admired Mara for herself, Harry could not decide; but he certainly was no mere down-at-the-heels tramp; he was a man. Harry felt as if he had been preached to by this pocket-picking derelict. Ludlow, if annoying, was certainly an interesting enigma.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOSS OF MARINNA.

MARA presided at a breakfast served in a sunny dining room opening on a veranda, where a gaudy-tailed macaw flashed colors from his rainbow feathers whenever he swung into the sun. Bees hummed in the creepers that climbed the posts, and there were parrots in the whispering gums. The exquisite freshness of that early hour before the heat begins prompted Ludlow to say he was reminded of the Riviera. The bleating of the sheep on the runs, the voices of riders off for the day's work, the clatter of hoofs, the noise of the engine working the drill did not fit into any picture of the south of France. It was Mara who suggested that far-fetched comparison.

Mara had changed from her riding costume to a light gown. She looked less tanned in that cool, gray-papered room, and her face was softer from the shadows of her late bereavement. But her lovely chestnut hair, that burned to copper when the light struck it, the natural ivory of her skin, and her radiant glad manner seemed to belong to those French and Italian landscapes on the wall.

Conroy had thought Ludlow meant the Riverina of New South Wales, and he went off on his reminiscences.

"There wa'n't no station like this on the Riverina, when I first seen Mara. Chaps, you should have seen that hut on the Murrumbridgee, where this girl was born. A tin roof, so hot you could fry bacon on it——"

The girl did not seem to mind Conroy's recalling her people's early struggles; she looked up at the portrait of her father, and Harry saw her likeness to that strong, north-of-Ireland face. She asked Conroy for more details of his expedition. Conroy, warmed by the breakfast and also by a prefatory rum and milk from Macloed, became unusually fluent over his find at Jarvey's Soak. He waxed enthusiastic over his party and its equipment.

"I wish I could go with you, Jim," she said, glancing at Harry and Ludlow.

"Why not, Miss Laughlin?" said Ludlow.

"Why not?" echoed Harry.

Macloed, who had been feeding conscientiously, looked up at Mara dubiously. Conroy scowled and shook his head.

"No! We don't want women prospectors. Can't say you couldn't rough it, Mara; Pat's daughter could, of course."

The girl rose in her chair, as if it were a saddle. Something of that indomitable will expressed in the lines of her father's portrait came into her face. She was no longer the self-possessed hostess, but the galloping girl of the earlier morning.

"Well, why not?" she asked. "I could keep camp for you. Mother did."

"No—no! It's all right for bush wives. Fust thing, these young chaps would be falling in love with yer and——"

"Well, suppose we did, Jim?" suavely remarked Ludlow, with his utmost air of impersonality. "Wouldn't Miss Laughlin be an inspiration to us? I think it would be jolly. Women do everything these days. Why not? Let's talk about it, anyway, merely as an abstract proposition, Jim."

The Englishman's behavior, even with that early rum and milk, had been faultless. Harry, misled by his first judgment of him as a mere bounder, had to admit that. But now Ludlow was proving more subtle than the Australian had suspected. He was actually urging his suit

in front of them all under the mask of an abstract proposition; he was confessing his admiration with his eyes, with the soft flattery in his voice, as he outlined what might be done for her comfort; the thirst for her beauty burned in his face.

"Yurr talking nonsense, monn," broke in Macloed. "Who's to look after Marinna? She's the boss. Mara, these chaps have got to be on their way, and you're going to give them some things from the stores, aren't you?"

Mara rose to attend to the selecting of delicacies the car was quite capable of carrying—potted fruits, chutneys, raisins for duffs, and other sweets which Conroy's Spartan providing had omitted. She told Conroy that if he were worried about the weight of their outfit, at any rough traveling he could get out and walk.

A gentle tap came to the door while they were overruling Conroy—the regular beat of something on the sill.

"Oh, I forgot Biddy's sugar!" cried Mara, throwing open the back door to disclose her mare, pawing on the step for the sugar with which she was usually regaled after her breakfast gallop. "I believe she'll soon be able to lift the latch."

MARA then led the two young men to the station store, while Conroy and Macloed came out to admire Biddy.

"Mara'll be making a regular circus horse out of her," said Macloed. "She broke Biddy in herself, after cutting her out of a mob of thirsty brumbies that were crowding our fences. Lord knows where they came from! All unbranded myalls and dying for water. It was Biddy came to the station and told us Pat had fallen from his horse and broken his hip. Didn't ye, girl?"

The beautiful mare allowed Macloed to put his head against her neck; the dour man of accounts had all the back-block love of horseflesh.

"We were all out that day over the runs," he continued. "Nobody in but Mara and Wong, when Biddy appeared at the back door. Mara knew Pat had been out on her. She jumped on Biddy and allowed Biddy to lead her; she found that the old man had fallen from the mare and broken his hip. Sunstroke most likely. Mara managed to get him into the saddle in front of her and brought him home. That's why I let Mara go galloping the plains on her. Biddy knows what to do when anything happens, don't you, lass? You're half a black feller, aren't you? You ran away from your station when you were foaled, and your boss didn't know what he lost."

Biddy accepted Macloed's praise by arching her neck and whisking her tail. Presently Harry and Ludlow appeared, after having packed the car with the new stores, and joined the circle of admiration around the mare. Mara came out, once more in her riding clothes.

"I'll ride a bit of the way with you," she announced. "Biddy hasn't had half a day's work."

Harry offered to saddle the mare for her.

"You try. She'd kick the station down if any one laid hands on her but me. She's still out in the myall for all but me."

The mare stood still, an ebony statue, while Mara adjusted the girths, but once the girl was in the saddle those clean, lithe limbs seemed to quiver with energy; she rose on her pasterns in little quivering leaps, as if she were going to buck.

"She's straining at the start," called the girl, riding round to where the car had been left. In a few moments the party was on its way, cheered by all the station hands and Macloed; even Wong came out to wave a spoon and squeak: "Allee li, Missee Mara—allee li!"

"You'll head north for the wells and then south past Mount Hopeless?" asked the girl when they were off the station and starting away from all tracks across the salt bush. She was holding out her whip toward a slight rise on the far horizon.

"What do you know of Mount Hopeless, gal?" demanded Conroy. "You ain't been so far back."

"Oh, yes, I have, Jim." The girl laughed. "I've ridden there many times —not on Biddy—on nightmares."

She galloped ahead toward that blue blur; the car followed; Mara was leading the expedition.

The girl's radiant face had started

Harry's heart racing faster than his engine. He tried to keep his mind on his driving, which was difficult, when sand patches were added to rabbit holes. Their load was heavy, and sand was the main thing he dreaded. But that girl riding ahead, sometimes singing, sometimes calling back to him, swinging with every leap and curvet of her wild horse, compelled his mind to buck in unison.

"Slow up a bit, Harry," said Conroy, when the country began to change to patches of gravel. Conroy had sighted some rubble he wanted to examine. He was approaching the rocky feet of those distant hills; he could not pass any likely looking stone without questioning it for mineral.

"You never know what you're missing," he said. "The only way to prospect properly is to walk."

HARRY had to drive the car to the slow, patient gait of this searcher after finds; Mara came cantering back at the delay.

"We ain't in a hurry," said Conroy. "Stop the car. Jarvey's Soak will wait for us. That looks like pyrites."

Mara quickly dismounted and secured the stone before the old man could alight from the car. He looked at the stone closely, tossed it away, and Harry drove on. Henceforward Mara was assistant prospector to Jim Conroy, riding hither and thither across their front, like a sea gull flying before a ship. She rode off to likely rises and came back with handfuls of gravel. She was an extra pair of eyes to the old man. She even tore away to what she thought was quartz, but which proved to be the white saline crust on a dry, clay pan.

But all this delayed them, and the early-morning stage was not covered till long after midday. There was enough water in the well to refill their bags without drawing on the tank and to give Biddy a bucket. After their draining of it dry, more water began to seep into the well; there would be an inch or two by the following morning.

"It's time that gal started back," said Conroy, when they got into the car to tackle the next stage, but Mara was out of hearing and far ahead. Harry could see her turning in her saddle, sweeping the horizon with her eyes; he could not call to her to turn back; he even slowed the car to let her keep ahead; he knew she was enjoying the ecstasy of riding where she had never been before; where nobody was in front of her; where no blurring camp smoke spoiled that hot dome of incandescent blue, where the miles went on forever.

Conroy forgot his anxiety over the girl when the face of the country changed to red ironstone and even gleams of barren quartz. Harry had no anxiety about Mara just then; he was sharing her joy too much to have fear for her. Her mare had been watered; he knew what distances brumbies could travel; Biddy and the car had left tracks enough to follow home.

There was a further delay when Harry ran the car down the bank of an old creek and, warned by his road sense, just backed in time to prevent his wheels from being bogged to the axles in soft sand, the bed of a watercourse that had not seen water for a long time. Mara reported that that dry creek ran north and south for miles. Rather than lose time in searching for a detour, Harry determined to cross the sand by deflating his tires. The device was successful; the flat rims did not sink; hours of searching for a way round, or a hard way across that dry quicksand was thus avoided. Mara rewarded Harry for his ingenuity with the same flashing glance she had given him when he saved the sheep.

They had clear running after this; at times the car was able to race Biddy; after putting many miles between them and the dry creek bed, they camped in the evening in an undulating country of low rises, capped with scrub and the sparse spinifex grass that told them of more barren deserts beyond.

Ludlow built the fire; he had been unusually silent most of the trip. Harry thought he had taken Conroy's warning that every wasted word means a pull on the water bag. He had been helpful in pumping up the tires and turning over one side of the hood to let the draft of their speed cool their pipes. He had even

offered to drive the car to give Harry a rest, but Conroy would not allow that. Harry had won the old man's respect by his trick of getting that car across the sand. Later on Ludlow offered to ride Biddy, if Mara would like a change to the car. Mara dared him to try and mount her mare. Altogether Ludlow seemed trying to adapt himself to his company and the country.

CONROY had gone off from the camp to look over the plain in the light of the setting sun. The low, horizontal rays sometimes strike hidden glitters. A chap once found a slug in the Murchison, he said. Saw the blaze of it under a twisted root of sandalwood. Would have missed it if the sun had been higher. Conroy had gone off, after delivering this bit of wisdom. Only gold could make Conroy say so much now.

Harry, who had crept under his car, had been listening to Conroy. He stayed there until the sun dropped, and he could see no more. He came out rather oiled up and very much the mechanic in his working clothes. Ludlow was off in the mulga somewhere, chopping more firewood. Mara was bending over the fire, cooking. The picture of her by that lonely fire, backed by that untrodden sand and sparse scrub awoke his protective instinct.

"It's a jolly shame," he said, "bringing you so far; we should have sent you back hours ago."

"Oh, I'll be all right. There are no clouds, and I'll have the moon most of the way to that well."

She answered him quite casually, meeting his anxiety with belittling indifference, as is the way of the bush. Harry's downcast way of approaching the girl prevented him gaining the glance she gave him. She went to the car and, from under the stores she had helped to pack at Marinna, she drew a feed bag well supplied for Biddy. Her escapade had been well planned.

"I knew Donald would have objected," she laughed.

"I would have objected, too, Miss Laughlin," said Harry, not without admiration for the girl's mischief. "I wouldn't have driven the car a yard if I'd thought you were coming so far. But you can't go back to-night alone. I will drive with you as far as that well."

"I need no escort in the bush."

"Suppose you meet blacks—myall blacks?"

She laughed confidently.

"I'm a myall myself. Every black feller help along big miss feller. She boss Marinna—help black feller pickaninny," she said, imitating the pidgin English of the blacks. "There isn't a tribe for a thousand miles that doesn't know Marinna and hasn't had our sugar and tobacco; so don't you fear for me. I couldn't get lost for I should go to sleep in the saddle, and Biddy would take me to our slip rails."

She slipped the bag over the nose of Biddy, who dropped her head and began feeding.

"I'm not going to let you go back over that country alone at night," said Harry determinedly, and for the first time daring to look her in the eyes. Their glances clashed. Harry in his emphasis dared to put his oiled hand on her sleeve. Harry might have lost more of his shyness, but that the spell was broken by a glare and a shower of sparks, as Ludlow threw a pile of dried sticks, covered with weathered leaves, on the fire. In the flare he looked something maleficent.

"Let me rub that oil off your sleeve," Ludlow said hoarsely.

"It's nothing," said the girl, laughing with an unusual lack of self-possession. "Harry was trying to brand me. It can stay till I get home."

She quietly repulsed Ludlow's attempt to clean her sleeve, and she tried to smooth over the incident by one of her colloquies with Biddy. Something had to be done to take the edge off Ludlow's remark and damp the fire she had kindled between the two men. Conroy, returning to the camp, had heard her words.

"How are you going to get home, Mara?" he asked. "Bless me, I forgot you wa'n't in the party. You can't go to-night. Better camp with us and start back in the morning."

"That's exactly what I intended to do. That's why I brought Biddy's feed bag,"

she said, as she began dishing out a stew of canned meat and dried potatoes.

The meal was constrained. Ludlow glared into the fire; Conroy sought in the embers further hints of his Eldorados; Harry watched Mara feeding Biddy a handful of sugar.

"No more, girl," she said. "It's bad for your wind, and you've a long ride to-morrow. Will you stay around the camp without hobbles? I didn't bring them, anyway; you know that. Myalls don't like harness or hobbles, do they? Myalls like to be away from fenced paddocks, don't they, girl?"

Harry was made aware that the girl while addressing her mare in low tones of infinite tenderness and fellowship was also speaking to him. She was justifying her scamper into the desert; she was telling him he must not try to hobble Pat Laughlin's daughter by any dictation.

Biddy slipped back into the outer darkness, cropping the salt bush and what grass she could find. The silence of the desert held them with its magic; the fire burned low, purring almost inaudibly; not a sound came from the plains. Harry felt his senses stretching, as if he was hearing what he had never heard and seeing what he had never seen. The stars seemed to be speaking, and when the moon rose, a mellow and magnificent splendor, Harry knew from that mystic communion of a camp fire that the girl would never marry Macloed.

THE spell was broken when the men finished their pipes, and Conroy felt the first chill of dew falling from a sky that was cloudless.

"Lucky we got an extra blanket for you, Mara," he said. "Chaps, make her a bit of fire for herself near by and a mimi."

Harry and Ludlow arose to select a spot sufficiently private, but not too far from the main camp. Behind the car was a ledge topped by mulga, and beyond that a depression with a bottom of dry grass. Harry tore up salt bush to spread her blanket over, while Ludlow lit her a fire. She refused to allow them to cut her a mimi; that wind shield of chopped bushes was unnecessary.

"Good night," they cried to her, as they left her.

"Call us if you need anything," added Harry.

"Thanks! I have everything."

Ludlow, thinking, however, she might need a water bag, went back to their own camp to get her one.

Harry stood on the ridge out of sight of her fire, after Ludlow had taken her the water bag. Over his now wider view of the plains Harry could see the little clumps of salt bush, like silver incrustations on the darker sand and gravel. Near the horizon the stars were shining brightly. By his own fire below, he saw Conroy wrapped in his blanket. That splendid old warrior of the waste took on heroic hues, as he lay there on his battle ground, and the girl's last words assumed more than a common meaning. She had, indeed, everything. The bush had dowered her magnificently with its gifts. Harry was stirred by the spirit of the bush, which is not the gift of tongues, but rather the gift of a divining silence. He had been able to see into her heart by what she had not directly said. She would be never hobbled to a man of figures and ledgers; Harry also saw into his own heart and knew now that he loved her. Such broodings by camp fires, lit between the earth that takes the body and the infinities that await the spirit, that have nurtured the world's religions and given man all his gods, assured Harry of this.

Suddenly he became unpleasantly aware that Ludlow was not with him nor at their own fire; he heard low voices behind him over the ridge; Ludlow had remained to steal words with the girl.

Harry's moon-bred mood of ecstasy gave way to anger. How dare the fellow take this advantage? Of course, superficially Ludlow was a gentleman, but Harry knew that desert dreaming and star gazing is just as apt to breed devils as gods, especially in embittered failures cultured beyond their characters. Besides, Harry was naturally and humanly jealous. He was not at all sure of winning Mara; she had been equally nice to both of them.

Harry's hand clutched on the twigs of

the mulga till they pierced his skin. He ground his heel into that desert sand, as he realized that Pat Laughlin's daughter would never be won by a sentimental wooing. She was too thoroughly trained in a hard school to be gained by anything but action. She would have to be wooed by the ways of Pat Laughlin, who had cut out a principality from the back blocks and died in his saddle.

Yet women are women—those fellows from home, with the reserves of centuries in their manners and their gifts of the tongue, had often a big start.

HARRY hesitated what to do while listening to that duet beyond the ridge, which might prove the spirit of the desert to be a tantalizing devil to him, robbing him of Mara. He could not break into their talk without a reason, despite the very hot ones that were tingling in his fists and his boot tips.

Smoke, with a strange, unpleasant odor, struck his nostrils; he looked down keenly at his fire and saw that what smoke was arising was drifting away from him; that horrible reek must be coming from Mara's fire. He climbed the ridge again. He could see the two standing to the windward of her fire, the Englishman with that deferential stoop of his and Mara not at all repellent.

"Hello, there, Luddy! You must have put dogwood on that fire," called Harry, steadying his voice.

Mara should have scented that horrible dogwood. The fact that she did not do so was ominous. Ludlow's seductive flow of words must have been absorbing.

"Can't you smell it?" repeated Harry, for they did not seem even to hear him.

Ludlow stiffened himself and glared into the mulga. Biddy, who had been taking her last bite before bedtime, emerged from the dark behind Mara. Mara stooped and drew a smoldering log from the fire and extinguished it under the sand. Ludlow came tramping over the ridge.

"Better let me cut some wood for her," began Harry. "You don't know dogwood from sandalwood."

Ludlow tearing through the thicket lurched against him.

"I know a sneaking, prying, son of a colonial!"

"Quiet, Ludlow."

Ludlow had been emphasizing his insults with a hand that still held the small ax which had cut the wood. Harry grabbed the hand and fought to get the ax. Their mutual fingers on the steel kindled a red flare of blood lust that flickered for a moment between the two men.

"You'll not cut her wood! You leave her alone."

"What business is it of yours?" demanded Ludlow.

"Everything," hissed Harry, keeping his voice down so as not to alarm Mara or awaken Conroy.

The two men, really of the same race, though of different breeding, not barbarians, yet surrounded by everything that tends to barbarism—a lonely waste, a woman loved, a crude but capable weapon to their hands—fought for that weapon.

"Let's go off a mile and fight this out," gasped Harry.

"You fool! What good will fighting do? She has refused me and the prospect of a title. I almost—— I'd have overridden her refusal, but you broke in with your dogwood!"

Harry let go the ax. Ludlow had been speedy. Harry had seen a long track ahead of him before he would propose to the mistress of Marinna. But the blood lust cooled in his fingers at the way Ludlow groaned. Harry was still near enough to the primitive animal to be almost asking the Englishman why he did not bring his coronet, or whatever it was went with titles. But Ludlow throwing away the ax, as if he were repelling some ghastly temptation, standing like a stricken bullock before it falls, made Harry hold his words. The ax rang, as it struck the car somewhere, and Ludlow surged forward toward the fire. "I never did like killing," he murmured. "But it's no use fighting, is it? She's—she's too fine to fight over, isn't she?"

Again Harry felt rebuked by some streak in the Englishman—some reappearance of an old strain that came up when he was deeply stirred.

"Man, she ought to be crowned with sapphires and diamonds and wear ermine," he said. "Solomon himself could not give her raiment royal enough." He lifted his face, strained with despair, up to the moon; he flung his hands, that a few moments ago were tingling with murder, toward that pale luminary which had started all this.

"I'm a grasper at the moon, Harry. I've never got the woman I wanted. Something always breaks in, like your damned dogwood. I couldn't even get killed in the war, when all I loved was annihilation. All my loves back-flash in my face. I thirst and I thirst, and there are aloes in every cup."

"I say, old man," said Harry, with an almost brotherly tenderness, moved by a suffering he could see but not plumb, "let's smoke a pipe and turn in. What you've said I'll forget."

Harry's sedate sense, which the Australian had to fight for, nevertheless brought Ludlow back to earth.

"I suppose you think it's a clean run for you now?" he snarled. "It is not. I never abandon a desire till it's satisfied. I have never failed to get the thing I wanted."

Ludlow, the moonstruck, Harry did not understand, but this bragging cynic he could cope with. The little pity he had for Ludlow evaporated.

"Just now you said the opposite," he snapped back.

"My dear fellow, you don't appreciate the truth of paradox. She never turns out to be the woman I want, when I get her, but I always get her. That's life, isn't it? What you get is merely an approximation to what you want, and each must be discarded for the next. Do you see what I mean."

Whatever Ludlow was actually meaning Harry never knew; that seeking for epigrams might be merely Ludlow's way of crying sour grapes. Harry had no time to think, for Ludlow had lit his pipe and thrown away the burning match, which fell in a trickle of petrol spilled from the feed pipes of the car, which had been severed by the ax. A great roaring flared into the night. The car was burning up.

CHAPTER IV.

BIDDY BOLTS.

CONROY had leaped up at the alarm and called on them to save the water first. Harry had been trying to prevent the burning petrol from reaching the tank of the gravity feed. Conroy made him aware of their greater need. He and Ludlow began freeing the emergency water tank and throwing out their stores. Then they scraped and shoveled sand to throw on the burning mass. Mara was helping with this, when Harry heard a cry from her, but she had not been burned by any sudden splutter of flame. She was calling to Biddy; she had run up to the mare and was trying to bridle her.

"She's frightened of fire. All myalls are. Help me, Harry!" she cried.

Then the after tank exploded, and the flash lit the desert for miles. With startled eyeballs, Biddy broke away from them and, kicking up the gravel in their faces, galloped off in terror to the safety of the dark.

The girl followed, calling to her pet mount to come back to her. The first flash of the escaping petrol subsided to a red glare—more smoke and heat than light—as the flames shriveled the cushions. Harry caught one distant vision of the flying mare and Mara running after her, when the desert went dark again; his eyes for a moment went blind from the glare he had been fighting. Then came another eruption of flame, as the caps for their dynamite exploded. Luckily, none of the fulminate was near enough to the dynamite to strike it off; without the percussion of the caps, the dynamite simply melted away and burned harmlessly, though the men instinctively threw themselves on their faces when they heard the caps explode.

When Harry had crawled to a safe distance and rose to his feet, he could see neither Mara nor the mare, though he could still hear her calling. Leaving the others to continue their efforts to save what they could from the car, he ran out over the salt bush, shouting to Mara to return.

Once away from his mates, far from

the fire, now subsiding to a mere glow behind a rise, the stark desolation of the plains appalled him with apprehension for her. He could see nothing but still, moonlit mulga and salt bush—little ridges topped with scrub, petty hillocks of ironstone, the dry and immobile waves of the desert, as lifeless, as silent, as eternally empty as the landscapes of that moon. The girl had stampeded into it after her stampeding mare.

He called to her, and his voice was lost. He was shouting into emptiness; not an echo returned to him.

Bush bred though she was, Mara might easily lose her fine sense of direction on that phantasmal flat land, where every mulga clump was like another, and the ridges were mazes. Even if she could follow Biddy, what help would be the frantic hoofprints of a brumbie-bred mare, reverting in her panic to her wild beginnings? All Conroy's grim tales of men perishing a few yards from a camp they could not find—of men lost for weeks in this aimless country—smote Harry, with their ghastly possibilities. Mara had gone into that desert, made more bewildering by the checkering shadows of the moon, without even a water bag.

As he thought of her calling, holding out a bridle to the flying mare, and not carrying even a pint of water to help her, when that moon should give way to the pitiless sun, he had to fight his terror for her—to forget pity and to forget even that he loved her, lest he weaken. That desert demanded the thinking of men made of granite, iron, and sand. Emotion would cloud his judgment—make him hear her where she was not—bemuse and dizzy him with deliriums; for the desert maddens before it destroys.

He ceased calling to her; the repetition of her name, that as yet he had hardly whispered to himself, was more choking to him than a mouthful of that sand. Love had to be put aside till he had found her.

He tried to follow the mare's tracks; this he could do where the earth was soft, and where her first frightened kicks had dug deep, but where she had broken into her light, assured gallop of liberty he lost them. Only a black fellow could trace those tracks across stone and gravel in that mingle of shine and shadow, and Harry's bush craft was not a black fellow's. He soon lost them and almost lost himself; he was only saved by occasionally turning to the faint red glow of the fire, now far away.

PERHAPS the best thing he could do would be to return to camp; the three of them could diverge in search of her, after building a big central fire, and each man lighting a fresh fire as he went farther out. But he could not bring himself to lose time by returning; every minute she was getting farther away; every second increased the risk of losing her. He gave her no credit of bush craft of her own; he would risk no assumptions that she was anything but a child running after her toy, the myall mare, and losing herself in the search.

He picked out the highest rise he could find and strained his eyes over the plains. His only guidance to any direction was that dim spark of fire, and the mare would certainly gallop away from the fire. It was true that by this time she might be on the opposite side of it to him. She might be leading Mara in widening rings around that focal flame, which had frightened her. Lost men travel in circles. Do lost horses? he asked himself.

He caught a white gleam, as though the lowering moon was lightening distant water. There were no bodies of water in that country, of course; he judged it must be white sand. From the position of the camp and a rough estimate of the way he had come, he thought it might be more of that gray sand, like that which had nearly stalled his car. It could not be that dried creek, which was miles below the horizon. There was no mulga on that shining sliver of dim white. After making binoculars of his hands, to open his iris against that blinding brilliance, he saw a speck in the white, and the speck was moving. He made sure the speck was not a horse, and then, leaping over the bushes, tearing through when it was too high, fearful he would lose sight of it when he dropped to a hollow, picking it up again when he came to a rise, he

sprinted with his utmost speed toward it. Luckily he came up to Mara before she was hidden in the mulga beyond the sand strip. She was still calling to Biddy, still carrying the bridle; but there was no sign of Biddy; no hoofs marked the sand; no whinny of reply came from the plains, now growing darker, as the setting moon lengthened the shadows.

"Mara! Mara, come back to camp!"

The girl did not seem to know of his presence; she went on calling, though her voice was weak, hoarse and tearful. She kept trudging over the sand, staring into the thickening distance. He caught her arm and again begged her to give up the search. She broke away from him, as if he were mere detaining thorns, and kept on. Harry knew now that he had to master a myall girl. He grasped her boldly and turned her face up till she had to see him.

"Mara, you've got to come back. You'll never catch the mare to-night. She'll come into camp by morning, and you're not going after her any more to-night. Do you hear? I will not let you!"

The girl struggled, with a strength that was not incommensurate with his; she tried to plead with him, but finally gave way, collapsing with sobs on his shoulder.

A thirst more burning than any born of deserts assailed Harry; he wanted to soothe, to comfort, to fondle her. He could feel her heart pounding close to his, like a tom-tom. But that cold waning moon held his hand and kept his arms from aught but the mere support of her; that dead planet, sending its stolen light from its bleak wastes to a land as waterless, preached restraint. This was not the time nor the place for even affection. She yielded to the arms that turned her home to camp.

"See! Conroy has built a blaze to guide us," he said, as they caught a rising glow over the ridges.

WHEN they reached the camp they found Conroy taking stock of what had been saved, while Ludlow was keeping the fire fed. The air was thick with the odor of petrol, oil and burned leather. Harry answered no questions till he had Mara comfortably pillowed on a blanket, and then in a few words he told of Biddy's stampede, while he filled a pannikin for Mara from one of the water bags hanging on the mulga. He was pouring a full one for himself, when Conroy spoke quietly.

"We'll have to go easy on the water now, Harry. Only got what's in the tank between us and the soak. The condenser's melted; we'll have to carry what we can in bags and ration it. Can't say I'm sorry, for that's the only way to prospect. Keep on your legs and see the country proper."

To Harry's amazement, Conroy was actually grinning and was not at all depressed at the loss of the car.

"And we can carry a month's supply of grub easily—plain grub, none of them tinned entrays. Flour, tea and a little meat."

Harry had seen nothing but the failure of the expedition and a long desperate tramp back to Marinna. Conroy was going to keep on.

"But you're forgetting Mara, Jim," he said.

"Ain't forgot nothing. Never forget when I'm on me natural legs, instead of bucking on rubber tires and riding gas pipes. One of you boys will have to walk back with her and join us later. She can walk just as well as she can ride."

Conroy's disposal of a hundred-mile tramp on short water and thin grub was not mere callousness. Conroy was on the Wallaby in his own country and fully equal to its harsh necessities; he expected the same competence from all those with him. Mara's sex meant nothing to this man who so mastered his years.

"I am going to take her back," broke in Ludlow. "It was my fault the petrol was spilled."

"Yes. Me and Luddy has talked it out," backed up Conroy.

"You can't. You're not a bushman," said Harry hotly.

"And you are!" Ludlow smiled from across the fire. "So the expedition will suffer less from my absence. Miss Laughlin will eke out my deficiencies. My position will be that of her bodyguard."

Harry's face blazed. Ludlow was cunning enough to try and hold Harry by his devotion to Conroy and his quest. Harry could not tolerate giving Ludlow a free field with Mara. Once at Marinna, he knew that Ludlow would forget the expedition.

"You chaps can argue it out," said Conroy. "I got to sleep. We got to do thirty miles a day, for three days, to make Jarvey's Soak on that water."

"There's no argument," said the girl, rising from her place by the fire, "because I'm not going back. I can carry a swag as well as any of you, and I've always wanted to."

She was making a childish adventure out of this risky undertaking.

"Mara, you can't!" cried Harry.

Mara laughed lightly; Conroy turned from his bedmaking; Ludlow sat up with a glow in his face that did not come from the fire.

"I've always wanted to be a swaggie," she continued. "Besides, you need me. Silly boys, throwing an ax about and smashing things. I'll be the bodyguard for all of you. You can't stop me, Harry, because I will not let you."

She flung back at Harry the dominating command that he had enforced upon her out on the plain; the bush-bred girl had to recover her pride.

"But you can't—you can't rough it like us," urged Harry.

"Why can't I?" she answered, with a rising voice and a flash of temper. "I am Pat Laughlin's daughter and his wife's daughter. My mother walked twenty-four miles to have me properly born and then carried me back home in her arms."

"That's right," came a leonine growl from Conroy.

"I am bush born and bush bred. I can stand anything the bush does to me. I am going on with you."

But Harry, desperate at seeing that Conroy and Ludlow were inclined to back up the girl's preposterous proposition, contended against it.

"What's the sense of it? Jim says we can't carry more than a month's tucker, and that will be low rations. I am not going to see you go hungry. If you go with Jim, I'll walk back myself and get a relief party from the station."

The girl's face softened.

"It won't be necessary, Harry," she said. "Biddy will be jumping our fences and whinnying at our back door by tomorrow. That will be enough to start Donald out with pack horses."

The mention of the Scotchman chilled Harry; the girl spoke so confidently of Donald's care for her that perhaps, after all, she really did care for her manager. But the spirits of the others were lightened; they understood now that Mara's desire to accompany them was not wild impulse; she was relying on her homing mare.

"But, suppose Biddy does not find the station? Horses can get lost as well as men. She has had very little feed and water. It's more than a hundred miles, as the crow flies, and she was not running straight."

Harry's criticism of Biddy only intensified Mara's faith in her mare.

"Biddy goes straight when she brings help to me. She heard me call. She saw the fire. She wasn't frightened so much as she knew help was wanted. She'll head straight for the station and keep on till she drops—only she won't drop."

The girl's confidence silenced Harry.

"Argument over," said Conroy. "Everybody turn in, and everybody sleep, as if you mean it. But just one word from me. From now on this gal is a member of the party, and I'm boss. I'm going to adopt her till we get back. Mara, this trip's going to be just as if old Pat was with us. That all right?"

Conroy swept the faces of the two young men with his searching glances. Mara nodded, the reference to her father silenced her. The young men knew quite well what Conroy implied. Conroy had probably heard something of that quarrel which had culminated in the fire.

"And maybe you'll sleep better," continued Conroy, "if you ain't worrying over that one-month tucker. I give word to Macloed to come after us with more, if we didn't appear in a month. Now, all shut up and sleep. My throat's dry with chinning."

He rolled himself up in his blanket and turned away from them. Mara, before returning to her own fireside, poured out half a pannikin of water and, despite the old man's objections, insisted on his wetting his throat.

"Mara, you don't mind me acting for Pat, do you?" Harry heard him whisper. "I heard him out in the spinifex tell me to."

Harry turned away. Just then it was easy to believe in the old man's superstition. The desert was not dead; it was peopled by the spirits of the men who had failed to reach it—prophetic hosts of the men who were coming. Harry was taking his last degree in the Grand Lodge of Loneliness; he learned that Conroy tramped at the head of ghostly battalions; Conroy's courage was the carrying on of theirs. Conroy could hear the voice of his old mate coming from the sand and the spinifex, and Mara was staying, not for a romantic prank, but because she came from the same breed.

CHAPTER V.

THE WILLY-WILLY OF THE DESERT.

AT the end of the third day later the party was overwhelmed by a willy-willy—the dreaded sand storm of the west.

Mara had borne the tramp well; she was not allowed to carry more than the smallest water bag, and she kept up easily with Conroy's long, rolling gait. Ludlow alone showed signs of breaking—by his desire to hurry, his eternal criticizing, and his unnecessary advice.

Mara had tried to show him how to fall forward, as he walked, like Conroy did; he had been getting no help from his weight. He tried to attain the tramper's knack, the way of the men of the Wallaby track; but when Harry pointed out to him that he was chafing his water bag against his leg, he became irritable.

On the third day of hot, blinding sunshine, Ludlow had run ahead of Mara to try and persuade Conroy to go south. His water bag had leaked dry, and he waved his hand to what he thought was a lake. Conroy shook his head.

"That's a mirage, Luddy," said Harry.

All that hot afternoon Harry walked in the rear, for Ludlow was perpetually dropping things out of his badly packed swag. He could see Ludlow continually lurching south toward that visionary water, now a blue gleam on the red horizon. The sun's rays were doubled in their intensity, where there was nothing but sparse spinifex and no mulga for a shade, when they camped. The water bags that had not leaked were drying quicker than they had anticipated; the wet lines on the canvas were going lower, and their upper halves were covered with dry, caked mud.

The mirage came closer; they could see trees reflected in it.

"If that's a mirage, then it's a mirage of a lake somewhere," persisted Ludlow, catching up with Mara. "We ought to go south, refill the bags, and——"

"Those lakes are hundreds of miles away and salt," said Mara, closing her lips again, that had been kept tight against dust and thirst, as she pushed on after Conroy.

Ludlow remained staring at those tantalizing gleams that quivered and grew wider every time he moved his head.

"Luddy," said Harry, coming up to him, "don't get that girl to talk. She gave half her tea to Conroy last night, and she's more thirsty than any of us. If you're down, keep your mouth shut about it."

"I'm no more down than you are. I'm thinking of her."

"Then stop thinking of her. She's a better man than any of us, except Jim. You go soft thinking of her."

Ludlow let slip his swag straps, and his blanket fell on the sand.

"Drop yours," he said to Harry, "and let's see who's the softest. Do you think I can't stand what you can?"

It was not a fight that was promised—it was mere physical rivalry. But the madness of two men descending to a wrestle or a petty mill with fists, when the sun's rays were like stupefying blows, and the desert seemed a hot, red mouth gaping for their bones, made Harry laugh.

"I meant soft in the brain, Luddy. If

your muscles are all right, carry this hammer. You dropped it a mile back."

Harry threw the hammer at the feet of Ludlow and began tramping on once more over those miles Conroy had so underestimated. It had been hard to laugh. The stoppage bred a fatigue of its own; that unnecessary clash with a man who was weakening was a temptation to lift his water bag to his lips. Ludlow was weakening because he did not meet the bush fairly. He was thirsting for more than water, for Harry had heard him rambling in his sleep. It is not the best way to meet the desert to be dreaming of pewter pots of the town. Harry hurried on, for he had lost sight of Conroy, and Mara was hidden to the waist by a low sand ridge.

WHEN he came up to her, Conroy was with her; both were tying handkerchiefs over their mouths. Conroy pointed to a strange, reddish cloud rising to the north. Around them arose hot gusts of wind, and little whirlwinds were scooping up the sand by their feet. Those clouds—rolling swirls of cumulus —were mounting into the blue. Ludlow had just come up to them when, with a roar and the utter disappearance of the plain between them and that racing red cloud that seemed to be eating the horizon, the willy-willy was on top of them.

Conroy had given Mara the rope end of his swag lashing for her to keep in touch with him; Ludlow and Harry, bending to the wind, laden with sand, gravel and the sweepings of dried grass and twigs, and blown in their faces with the force of a gale and the impact of a sea, staggered after them.

By what animal or superhuman sense Conroy kept to any course, Harry did not know. The old man plunged confidently ahead through that whirl of gyrating sand, which poured under the shirt collars they had buttoned and percolated through the handkerchiefs across their mouths. It filled their eyes with smartings, for that wind had gathered the dry salt from innumerable clay pans and bitter lakes.

Harry kept close to Mara. The rope between her and the old man never once became tight. She did not have to be dragged, but he was ready with his arms to link in hers, if she did. He could hear the gurgle of the water in his bag every time his ears were clear of the wind, and he clung to the handle tightly. Every drop now was worth more than all the gold of Conroy's seeking. Mara, too, was holding tightly onto hers; dumbly he offered to relieve her of it; she shook her head, and out of her eyes, red-rimmed with dust, he saw a smile of courage and even laughter. The girl was assuring him that she could take this assault of wind and sand sportingly, that he need not fear for her.

He gave her a slap on the back for her spirit; from his admiration of her sturdiness the tap of encouragement became a man's slap to a man; she returned it; this mutual tribute of human to human, caught in a murderous chaos of destructive forces, lifted them above sex and softness and was a mating of mind to mind. They had found each other in the red, suffocating maw of a willy-willy. Harry felt his neck caught in the grip of a man's arm and heard words in his ear above the roar of the wind and the pelting of the sand. It was Ludlow's arm that was holding him, but in no animosity. Ludlow was trying to make himself heard.

"Make him camp. Blankets—Arabs —simoom!" was all Harry could make out; but he shook his head and pressed on, not daring to lose sight of those figures in that brick-red mist. Even Ludlow had risen to the emergency and was trying to tell them something out of his African experience.

Suddenly the enveloping glare turned to a dull gray; the sun had gone down, but the fury of the willy-willy was not abated. At times the very face of the desert lifted under their feet and dashed itself into theirs. They tripped over stones and slid on spinifex. If one were to fall, Harry sensed it would be fatal. It was growing darker, and perhaps there was reason in Ludlow's suggestion that they make tents of their blankets and wait for the storm to blow out. The light became grayer, and the sand looked like driving ashes collected from the with-

ered bones of all the men, sheep and cattle that had perished on the continent.

Harry tried to hasten to put Ludlow's suggestion to Conroy, but found it hard to quicken his feet, for the sand seemed to be clogging him. Suddenly he heard a muffled cry, and he forced himself forward to find Conroy, face down, on the sand. The old man had tripped over a rock, and Mara was trying to lift him. Harry stooped to help her, wondering if that magnificent old heart had at last yielded to a superior force.

He knew now why his feet had been dragging—why he had guessed rightly that the man who fell would be apt to lie there. The air near the ground was actually vicious with suspended sand; the face of the desert was moving like the washes of a dry sea; their ever-changing waves were splashing Conroy with sand.

He shielded Conroy as well as he could, lifted his head, and put his water bag to the old man's lips. He was soon relieved of his doubts about Conroy's heart, for the old prospector began scratching into the sand with his long fingers.

"Gold! Rabid, insane for gold!" gasped Ludlow from behind his handkerchief.

It was not gold Conroy was clawing for, nor was he insane. He was searching for the rock that had tripped him, and which he had rolled away from where he had fallen. He found a smooth, dark outcrop some feet farther off, plainly visible against the thick thrash of sand.

"Granite," he said. "Water-worn granite. We're at Jarvey's Soak. We'll camp under our blankets till the sand stops, and we can drink all we want. We've got to the soak."

"But where's the water? This sand is as dry as mummy dust," cried Ludlow, as his fingers, too, dug into the sand.

"Water's farther on at the soak. Only a few miles. It rains round here about once in six years, and the granite collects the water under the sand. You'll see to-morrow. We've done enough for to-day. Let's get under our blankets and see what we can do for a fire."

Conroy had led them through the willy-willy and found Jarvey's Soak with his feet.

THEY could not build a fire, for they found nothing to burn in their blind gropings; so they finished their water, ate what was left of their damper, covered themselves with their blankets, and slept.

After four hours of that sodden sleep of exhaustion, Harry began dreaming that he heard Biddy cropping around the camp. He awoke and sat up; his companions lay beside him—mere mounds in the sand that had rained on their blankets. But the willy-willy had blown itself out; the air was still; the thin dust, which still hung in the upper atmosphere, turned the moon to a ball of glowing copper. He could see now for some distance, and no horse was near. He was glad, for that sanded salt bush would be starvation rations, and, besides, Biddy's reaching Marinna was their best chance of relief.

The blanket was off Ludlow's face, and he was muttering something. Harry shook him, and Ludlow awoke at once.

"Zero hour, major?" Ludlow asked alertly. Then, seeing his error, he gruffly asked why he had been disturbed. He rubbed his eyes, complaining that they were sore. They were inflamed from the pelting of that terrible sand, and he wanted to go to sleep again. Harry persuaded him to get up—to get water and firewood for breakfast, for there should be mulga around the soak.

"Besides, you were sleeping in the moonlight, Luddy," whispered Harry, so as not to disturb the others.

"If I don't get a drink soon," growled Ludlow, "I'll be worse than moonstruck. It's a murder moon. I've seen her like that when the dead were piled six deep."

He started walking to escape those memories, still haunting him from his dreams, and began to murmur poetry.

"'I move among shadows, a shadow, and wail by impassable streams.' Where is that confounded oasis of yours?" he asked, as Harry caught up with him. Harry looked around at a prospect growing wider, as the air cleared.

It was weird and strange enough to inspire either poetry or madness. The uneven scars of that sun-baked plain, the gorings of the little gullies, the scabrous

outcrops, the harsh wrinkles of a land withered by drought—they were all smoothed out by that fall of brick-red sand. The sand was rippled with wind markings, till it looked like the dried bottom of some eternally ebbed sea. Overhead the moon was varying from her purest silver to an angry red, as those clouds of dust aloft trailed across her face.

"Damn you—you deceiver of the skies! You make tides in our brains and wreck us," cried Ludlow, shaking his fist at the imperturbable luminary behind the dust.

"Oh, shut up, Luddy. There's the soak," said Harry, who had made out a low hill to the south, with clusters of thin timber, where the soak ran into the sand. Where there is timber there is water. So Harry hurried on, disregarding Ludlow's ravings.

He had made up his mind about Ludlow. The man was certainly a gentleman, though somewhat in ruins. That bookish culture of his, which Harry had so envied at Marinna, had proved a burden in the desert. What value was literature unless it stiffened a man's endurance?—was the verdict of the son of a new country. Men like Ludlow found only melancholy in the great distances, the arid, unpeopled area of that country; they missed the flush of their English spring in the somber evergreens of the bush. So they are often found hanging by their necks in huts, with some classic in their pockets. Perhaps, also, Ludlow was suffering physically from his too-sudden deprivation of whisky and soda; that might arouse a more terrible delirium than could the sand and sun of the desert.

The long, low hill of granite loomed up like a slumbering saurian. The surface was smoothed by the washings of ancient rains; the stunted gums near the edge, where the rock dived into the sand, were living on the waters hoarded beneath. There were old holes gaping in the moonlight, with tins strewn on the dug sand, that some one had used to scrape up the water. Harry seized one of the tins and was about to feel his way to the bottom of one of those crude wells, when a shadow moved out from behind the thin trunks, and a man hailed him.

"Oh, hello, mate!" answered Harry. "Is this Jarvey's Soak?"

"Yes. But she's dry."

Harry stood still, palsied in his attempt to leap into that dark hole. He held out the tin with a lifeless hand. Ludlow ceased his muttering; this news was calamitous.

"You mean this hole?" asked Harry.

"All the holes. I've been digging round here for a week. She's dry, I tell you. Don't think you'll draw half a billy, and that'll be mostly mud."

With a choking curse, Ludlow seized the tin from Harry and jumped down into the hole. Harry could hear the tin rasping on the dry bed rock below.

CHAPTER VI.

AT JARVEY'S SOAK.

"OF course, I can give you a little," said the man. "I've got a condenser, and I distill it from a salt pan three miles south. Have you got a condenser?"

"Yes; but our car blew up and ruined it. We didn't think we'd need it. Conroy was sure there was water here."

Harry stopped; the scraping of Ludlow's tin on the dry granite was rasping his nerves. How were they to last out at this dry soak till Macloed appeared?

"You're welcome to use mine," the man droned on in darkness of the trees, "but it's only a little one, and it takes half a day to make a pint, what with cleaning out the salt and——"

The prospect of four men and a woman —and that woman all the world meant to him—depending for days, perhaps for a month, if the mare did not find the station, on the drippings of that one-man condenser was a desperate outlook to Harry.

"Got grub?" asked the man.

"Plenty. It's the water. Surely where there are trees——"

Harry's hand struck the thin trunk of one of the gums, whose hanging strips of bark added their whispering comment to the tired monotone of the camper by the soak. The rotten timber went in under Harry's fist, and a spurt of dust,

with a strange acrid odor, was puffed into his face. The tree was a half-rotten shell, sustained only by the native toughness of its little living wood.

"Going with the ants," said the man. "One fell last night, so I had to shift my camp."

He led them around a rocky cape which projected into the sand. They passed the carcass of a dead horse.

"I lost him the first week. Came out with him and a cart, expecting lots of water, like you. See, there ain't any flies around him. That shows she's dry. Nothing but ants can live round here now, and they'll soon eat up them trees."

They came to his camp, shut in on the sand by two reaching claws of the granite that sloped away up in a low incline behind the fire. There was the cart, a tent, a shelter built from branches for the tucker box, some tools, and a dry-blower's shaker, the big sieve of a dry country's prospector. The man gave them a drink from a water bag hanging from his shelter pole. The water had a curious earthy flavor. Harry had never before drunk condenser water; he had heard that the salt carried over sometimes, and that it was apt to taste of the rust of the condenser.

"Pretty rotten water, ain't it?" said the man, as if guessing his thought.

"Well, it's wet, anyway," said Harry, not wishing to appear ungracious to this really heroic hospitality. The water, at least, was cool from hanging in the bag.

"Rotten all the same, and it rots the man what drinks it. I lost half my weight here, and it killed my mate. There's his grave."

Behind the cart Harry now saw a heap of sand, with a rough cross stuck in it. The cross had been nailed together from strips of a packing case, and it bore the rude inscription: "Here rests Bill. A good mate. Let him lie."

Everything bore out the complete dryness of the country. The man now seen by the firelight was almost spectral in his leanness—a bearded skeleton halfway to the crows. Harry remembered he had not heard nor seen crows for days. Nothing could live here but ants. Harry spurred his brain to think of some way of saving the girl from having to be buried like that poor prospector, or from what was worse, being left unburied.

"Did you get any gold?" he asked, merely to say something, while his mind dug deep to the utmost of his resourcefulness.

"Gold?" cried Ludlow. "Forget the gold. We need water. Conroy can drink sand and live on pebbles; we can't. Have you a shovel?"

The man pointed to one beside the tucker box.

"There must be water, if you only dig deep enough," said Ludlow, taking the shovel and going off with it. They could soon hear its iron ringing on the granite, as Ludlow tried to follow the lay of the rock, in the hope that he would find a hidden cup somewhere in the sands.

Harry's question about the gold had not been answered. He had given way to that breach of gold-field custom as a relief from the tight hold he had been keeping on himself not to behave like Ludlow. He was summoning all he knew from bushies' talk and from the legends of lost explorers, how to face this dire emergency. He could hear Ludlow gasping, blaspheming, shoveling. That rasp of iron on granite was the only reward for those frenzied efforts.

"He'll only wear himself out and be thirstier than ever," said the man opposite him. "That's no good; the less rushing and the more thinking you do in this kind of country the better. You go and get your other mates, and we'll have breakfast."

The man filled his billy to make tea sufficient for them all, put more wood on the fire, and began kneading johnny-cakes of flour and water in a prospecting dish. The moon, Ludlow's murder moon that deludes men with her visions and leaves them to perish in deserts of the flesh or the spirit, had sunk. It was the dim, dark uncertain hour before the dawn—that zero hour when a man feels less than zero.

HARRY did not want to bring the bad news to Conroy and Mara till he formed some plan for the party to follow. He now took the leadership of the party

upon himself. From his overconfidence Conroy had led them to a perishing situation. Ludlow, desperately digging, goaded by his nerves, his thirsts, and by what hidden despairs he alone could tell, would be useless for any cool thinking.

Harry asked advice of the man making ing the cakes, who was of Conroy's type, accustomed to bush hardships, yet so human in his care of his mate's grave, so ready to share his small supply of food and water, that he now seemed finer than Conroy. Conroy had permitted Mara to come with them; Conroy was a gold-fevered fanatic; Conroy should have no further voice in what was to be done.

Harry asked this man what he knew of the country north and west; whether there might be soaks not as dry as this; what chance they would have of meeting other parties on horses or on camels that would carry them in. The man droned out all he knew, while drawing maps on the ashes.

"There's parties out east of Menzies. Of course, you can hit south over the Nullabor to the sea. If you make the Bight, you can always get turtle eggs and water good enough to drink on the beach."

"But how about you?" asked Harry. "Are you going to stay here?"

"Yes; that salt pan and my condenser is enough for me."

The man was laying the flat cakes in the ashes and turning them, as they browned.

"We'll go south," decided Harry. "Conroy will have to."

"Conroy?" murmured the man dropping a cake in the fire.

Harry did not try to help rescue the cake, for he heard voices on the other side of the soak. He ran over the rocks that were somewhat slippery from the grit of the willy-willy. He found Mara and Conroy who had missed him and Ludlow, and had followed them to the soak. There was now enough dim light to make this easy for them. Ludlow was standing by a desperately dug hole, a few feet from where the granite met the sand, and he was violently abusing Conroy.

"If killing would do any good, Conroy, I'd make this your grave. You wouldn't let me try for those lakes. You kept on, and we were fools enough to believe you knew this ash heap of a country. You said there was water here. Find it! Dig—damn you, dig!"

He tried to press the shovel on Conroy, who paid no attention, but was feebly feeling the sand Ludlow had excavated.

"Not even damp," he murmured, in a voice as weak as the bleats of the sheep Harry had led to the dam.

Ludlow ceased his vituperation only through exhaustion. He had been throwing up twice as much sand as was necessary to find that dry bed rock. He was panting. Mara tried to comfort Conroy.

"It won't matter," she said. "Biddy will bring us water."

Harry told them a breakfast was waiting them and led them to the camp around the soak.

"Hello, Jim," said their host, as they approached the fire.

Conroy did not respond at once; he had been stumbling along, blindly overcome by the shock at finding his soak dry. Now he looked up slowly.

"The towny—my old mate, Dick," he said at last. "You know there was always water at Jarvey's Soak."

He gave his hand to Dick, as if he had but lately parted from him. Mara led him to sit by the fire and tried to make him partake of the tea and cakes. Conroy could not eat nor drink till he had obtained further assurance from his old mate that the soak was dry.

"You see, Jim," went on Dick, "after I got back home I thought I'd have another try and come out with a horse and cart and three months' grub. Took a mate, too; poor old Bill yonder. Bill died from the water. It got rottener, as it went low. All mineral like—rank poison. I was glad it did go dry, for then I had to find a salt pan and distill some I could live on. It killed my horse, too."

Not till Ludlow, who was now calmer after the tea, had corroborated Dick by telling of the holes he had dug, did Conroy accept the dire surety that whatever rains had once fallen on the wide catchment of the granite had either slipped to lower levels or had percolated into the sand beyond all digging.

"I was right about the field, too, Jim," continued Dick. "It's only a tucker ground. All I got was this."

Exactly as Conroy had displayed his gold in the Sydney Domain, Dick now from the inside of his shirt produced some small slugs, with hard ironstone welded to them—the volcanic gold of the country—gold melted by primeval heat out of her ancient rocks—the gold of a land of thirst. Small as they were, however, the slugs revived Conroy. He ate his cakes, drank his tea, and lit his pipe. He looked around at the camp, the tent, the wind-proof, the cart, the water bags hanging under the cart, the food bags for the dead horse, with food still in them, and the cross with its plaintive appeal over the grave of Bill.

Harry put forth his plan of going south to the sea, though he thought it only fair to offer alternative suggestions.

"We could break north. Dick says there might be water in the ranges. Perhaps those plants, with great fat bulbs that leak water in your billy, will be there. But I think the south is the safest. And if Macloed should come, Dick can tell him where we went; or, if Dick decides to go, we can leave a message in a cairn for Macloed to follow us."

"But how about the water to go on?" differed Ludlow petulantly. "We can't tackle that sand again without plenty. I vote for more digging."

Conroy asked if he could have more tea, which was given to him. He sipped it slowly.

"Ain't sure you're wrong, Luddy," he said. "But Dick tried, and you tried. I think we'd better go for the sake of Mara."

"Don't consider me, Jim," said Mara.

"I can give you enough water to start you off," said Dick.

"Thanks," said Conroy, gazing into the fire, with all his old intent abstraction. "I'll like to give this field a try for a day or two. That gold of yours looks likely."

THAT was what Harry had feared—that Conroy would be kept fussing at the soak, by the temptation of those slugs. After one meager meal and his fill of tea, Conroy was ready for his old risks. Harry declared he was going back to their last night's camp to bring in the remains of their flour and tea, preparatory for an immediate start south to the sea.

"How deep is your salt pan?" asked Conroy of Dick, completely ignoring Harry.

"Water at three feet, but it makes very slow."

"What's the size of your condenser?"

"Five gallons. Didn't bring a big one 'cause I was sure the soak would last. It works awful slow, and it leaks, but I can give you all the water you can carry."

Conroy leaned forward and put another coal in his pipe.

"Mara," appealed Harry, "can't you make him listen? We can't live on this man's supply of water. And if Jim wants to stay——"

"I will stay with him," said the girl.

Harry was foiled. Conroy was still the leader. The party was trapped, held to this barren rock by thirst—thirst for water—thirst for gold. Ludlow's anguish would keep him digging for more wells; Mara's loyalty to the old man was also a thirst—the delusion of a mirage—the moonshine madness of an ideal. Harry's exasperation might have driven him to be as violent as Ludlow in attacking Conroy's stubbornness, but that Mara, with a cry, sat up in the sand.

"Listen! Listen!" she exclaimed. "I hear horses. Perhaps it's Donald."

"It's the brumbies," cried Dick, with some alarm.

Of course, it could not be Macloed so soon, but all heard the soft pad of hoofs on the sand and their louder beat on the granite.

"Lost horses, starving and thirsty," explained Dick. "Look out! They're wild."

Out of the shadow of the trees on the darker side of the soak came a mob of horses at a trot, breaking into a gallop, as they approached the fire. Harry instinctively threw his arms round Mara. The others beat off the horses, as they tore frantically through the camp, biting at the water bags and the food bags, sniffing, snorting and kicking out the fire

with their flying heels. They were of all breeds and all ages, and their unshod heels told how long they had been wild on their forage for food and water. Guarding Mara as best he could, Harry picked up a burning log and helped the others to frighten the horses off with clouts, kicks and shouts. Finally the horses scampered up the incline of the granite and halted there in the gray light of morning—a very frieze of suffering. The grim pallor of the dawn displayed their gaunt ribs and stringy necks. They all looked of the same color, merged into a monochrome by the desert dust.

"I never had them so bad," said Dick, when he had rescued a bitten and leaking water bag and saved what water was in it by allowing it to drain in a bucket. "Had 'em sniffing round me, when I was in me blankets, but they never rushed me when I was up like this. At their last gasp, I expect."

MARA had clung to Harry at that stampede of straining wild beasts; she still clung to him, as she listened to their irregular tattoo on the rocks. One horse had slipped and could only pick himself up after a great effort, accompanied by heavy heavings. The girl became hysterical at the sight. The sun rose, and the clear sky promised another blazing day.

"I say, Dick, where do those horses drink?" asked Ludlow.

"They don't. They've been cast off by men who didn't have food and water enough and didn't want to waste bullets on them. They hang round the soaks and wells and rush 'em when the teams leave. You can see they're mostly draft horses."

They were mostly heavy-haunched horses from abandoned teams, thinned to a brumbie leanness by hunger and thirst; their long, unclipped coats were matted with dry twigs and caked dust; their legs were muddy with the clay of salt pans they had tried to lick.

"One has shoes," cried Mara suddenly, as she picked out the metallic clink of iron on the granite.

The horses shivered and seemed to waver at her voice. They were hesitating whether to rush the camp again or to gallop off into the desert; they hugged close, shoulder to shoulder—a close mob of tired drooping heads and uncertain pawing hoofs.

"Nobody stir or make a sound," whispered Mara. "Biddy is with that mob." She grabbed up the bucket, half filled with water from the bitten bag, and advanced cautiously up the incline of the soak, softly calling to Biddy. Harry hurried after her. Even he could not distinguish anything like the black mare among those dejected, dust-stained animals. Perhaps Mara's nerves were snapping like Ludlow's. The breaking of this pitiless day on that parching mob of castaway horses had been too much for even Pat Laughlin's daughter.

"Mara," he called, "if they smell the water they'll run you down."

"Hush!" she said. "You're right, but don't shout, or they'll gallop away and take Biddy. Get me some sugar."

The girl seemed cooler than himself. A darkish chestnut separated itself from the mob. Harry heard the clink of shod hoofs; he then recognized the black mare metamorphosed into a chestnut by the dust of the willy-willy that had caked on a horse not too dried up to foam. It was Biddy.

The sugar was not necessary, for Biddy saw her mistress and, with a light kick at the mob she was abandoning, ambled over the granite toward Mara.

Mara proved that Pat Laughlin's daughter was a woman, by sobbing weakly and almost falling, as she clung to the matted mane of her mare. She recovered, however, when she became aware of the stillness of the men around her. She looked at the gaunt faces of Conroy and Dick—the grave beyond the camp. What Biddy's truancy from her duty meant to them all was what she read in the faces of her party.

"Oh, whatever will we do now? Donald won't know there's anything wrong, now that you've not gone back. Oh, Biddy! Biddy!"

She clung to the mare piteously. Biddy accepted her grief and her reproaches with equanimity, for she had half a bucket of water to attend to. Dick, en-

tirely misunderstanding Mara's wailing, approached her.

"If you're worried about your mare going off with that mob again, miss, I can spare yer a bullet for her," he said.

"Dick!" exclaimed Harry. "Can't you see the mare is her pet?"

Dick snarled nastily. Seen by daylight, the man did not look favorable. He had a sneaky, furtive expression that seemed to belie his generosity. He had offered the ammunition out of kindness.

"Well, my life is my pet," he snarled. "You don't expect me to go on watering her, do yer? She'll have to perish, anyway."

"You don't need to be brutal about it," said Harry.

"Well, ain't we all brutes—up against a perish—starving, thirsting brutes, just as much as them horses? It's brute agin' brute out here. And don't forget this brute has given yer your breakfast and will fill your bags to chance yer luck somewhere else."

Harry restrained his fists. His impulse had been to knock the man down, but Dick was not of the fighting kind; and the worst of it was that he was right. The mare would have to be shot. They could not go on the Wallaby again with a thirsty mare behind them, reaching her nose whenever they doled out their small drinks. Besides, Harry considered, if they came to a downright quarrel with Dick, the man would have a perfect right to refuse them the little water he had offered; for they were down to the bed rock of primitive brutalities.

There was no help in sight. The sun was growing hotter every minute, and millions of little suns were adding their glints of light and heat from the crystalline facets of that wide stretch of granite. Daylight only made their prospects more pitiless than they had seemed in the dark—even in the smothering blindness of the willy-willy. Thirst was in the earth, in the sky, in their hearts; they were ringed in by its fires of merciless necessity.

"Can't I ride her back to the station?" he asked Mara.

"Do you think I'd let you try, Harry?"

Their hands met in the matted, dusty mane of the mare.

"She'd never carry you without full feed and water," continued the girl. "She's been running wild with those brumbies. She's had no rest. I can't risk you, Harry. Let's keep together. We'll try to make the south. But Biddy will have to be shot. Only let me have the revolver—or whatever he has. I will shoot her, myself."

The girl was as white as death even under her tan, but her hand in Harry's was firm. She was obeying the same demand of the desert he had put upon himself. Love must learn to sacrifice itself if a greater need than love should arise. Dick went to fetch his Colt from the tent.

CHAPTER VII.

AT BED ROCK.

LUDLOW had been standing silently watching them. He could not help hearing what had amounted to an avowal of Mara's love for Harry. Conroy was grubbing somewhere round the camp. Harry had last remembered him dry-blowing some dust with one of Dick's dishes. Conroy, looking for gold, was oblivious of the sacrifice Mara was making.

Dick returned with the blue automatic.

"It's loaded full," he said, "but you ought to do it with one shot."

The girl only nodded, as she took the weapon. Harry was certain Biddy's death would be swift and painless.

"Just a minute, Mara," broke in Conroy, suddenly appearing and waving a shovel. "Turn that revolver on this skunk first, will you?"

Conroy was pointing at Dick and lifting the shovel, as if it were an ax.

"He's got water here—barrels and tanks of it, unless I'm mistaken. Hold him, Harry!"

Dick had made a sudden grasp for the revolver, but Harry's itching fist seized its opportunity, and he landed on the jaw of the man who had tried to wrestle with Mara, and Dick went sprawling on the granite. Harry did not know what Conroy meant, and the old man was yelling as frantically as if he had found a fifty-ounce slug. His face was flushed with delight, and he was dancing on his

toes, as he stood over the prostrate Dick, waving the shovel.

"I ain't mistaken. He's got water. I'm certain, cos he tried to get the gun. Wanted to shoot us, too—the scum of a back alley, pretending to be a prospector. Here, Luddy, dig! If we don't get enough water to last the month, my name ain't Conroy. This fellow has been holding back on us, trying to scare us away from this find, talking about his salt pan. There ain't no salt pan for fifty miles. I know. Dig, Luddy, damn yer, dig!"

"Where shall I dig, Jim?" asked the bewildered Ludlow.

"In that fool grave—under that fool sign. Rip it out, man! There ain't no body there. There ain't no Bill. This man never had a mate. There's the mark of only one pair of pants on the cart seat, and pants sweat in this climate. Got two bunks in his tent, yes. Smart, ain't yer? Well, you're not smart enough for Jim Conroy. If there ain't water in that grave, you can harness me in his cart, and I'll haul you all back to Marinna."

In an instant Ludlow had hauled out the counterfeit-grave cross and began shoveling up the sand.

"Two bunks," continued Conroy. "Towny, you're smart, but you ain't quite smart enough. That tea you gave wasn't made with distilled water. It tasted of rotten granite. I ain't traveled on it for years without knowing. Keep on digging, Luddy."

Ludlow's shovel struck not granite, but metal; he had uncovered the red top of a fifty-gallon water tank. He prized off the feed hole. It was full to the brim of cool, clear soak water, free from the sediment which had sunk to the bottom.

"I missed yer tank," continued Conroy, keeping Dick covered with the Colt which Mara had given him. "You should have had two tanks, like you dished up two bunks. You're clever all right, but not quite clever enough."

Mara and Harry crowded to the edge of the hole that Conroy's perspicacity had guessed contained such a treasure. Conroy continued his excoriation of the townsman, but his glee at his own cleverness for a time took the edge off his wrath. Not all the gold he had found, or ever expected or hoped to find, could have roused such delight in him, as Ludlow began dealing out the water in a dipper.

"Can't Biddy have some more?" said Mara.

"All she wants," shouted Conroy. "There's water in the soak—more than we'll need. This feller just dried up the holes and kept 'em dry."

Biddy was soon well watered. Mara had to repress her pitying glances at those other horses, still on the edge of the soak. She took the bridle, which she had been carrying round her waist ever since Biddy had bolted, and slipped it over the mare's head. There was a chance now that some one could ride on the bare back of the revived Biddy and make Marinna.

Conroy continued venting his abuse of Dick, his anger mounting at the enormity of the man's offense.

"I've heard of men hiding their gold in pretended graves—that's all right. But to grab the water! Towny, I've seen men have their ears cut off and turned loose in the spinifex for stealing a handful of flour. But jumping water—— Towny, we ought to hold a round-up and try yer. Hanging ain't bad enough for yer, and these trees wouldn't hold yer."

"Leave him alone," said Ludlow, coming out of the hole. "And hand me that revolver. You're liable to hit somebody with it."

The old man allowed himself to be divested of the Colt he had been waving so dangerously, and, picking up a prospecting dish, he began beating on it with his clenched fist.

"Roll up! Roll up!" he cried, almost childish in his excitement.

THE blatant uproar had startled the horses up above, and their clattering hoofs began to excite Biddy, till Mara had to mount her bareback to hold her by the restraint of a rider. The mare was actually bucking.

"Dick did quite right," said Ludlow. "It is brute against brute out here."

Conroy was aghast at Ludlow's championing Dick, who was still sprawling on

the rock, without lifting a voice or raising a hand at Conroy's abuse of him.

"The only mistake he made was not pegging out his land," continued Ludlow, his face working with strange feelings which Conroy was blind, and which Harry was too busy with soothing the mare to suspect.

That last spasm of excited labor—that feverish discovery of the tank—had exposed the latent barbarity that was in Ludlow; but, being a barbarian plentifully supplied with brains, he was clever enough to cloak his appetites with reason.

"Have you a miner's right, Dick?" he asked.

"Of course," said Dick.

"Then you have a title to everything in that claim. You know that, Conroy."

"Yes, mineral, but not water. Besides, he ain't pegged it out," cried Conroy, furious at this defense of the towny's spoliation.

"That's soon settled. Dick, peg!" said Ludlow, lifting Dick to his feet. "Peg out your claim and hire me as your mate. I can't peg it, as I have no miner's right, but I can help you to hold this water against all comers. Now, Mr. Bushy, get off this land, or I'll shoot, and the law of your commonwealth will uphold me."

Harry turned from Mara and the mare to find Conroy gazing at the mouth of the automatic held by Ludlow, who stood intrenched in the hole, while Dick was sticking twigs into the fifteen square feet of earth surrounding Ludlow and the party's sole supply of water. The bewildered old man would have advanced right up to the mouth of that automatic, had not Harry held him back.

"Ride over him, Mara!" shouted Conroy. "Back the mare agin' him. Show him a buck jumper's heels."

Ludlow laughed. There was something satanic in his appreciation of Conroy's strategy.

"Good move, Conroy! But I happen to know something about cavalry. She would have to back some yards to get up speed. You can't charge from a halt. And you forget the element of time. It will pay you to believe that I am a deadly shot."

There was no doubting the cool control of nerve that now possessed Ludlow. The mouth of the automatic pointed from one to the other of the two men, but did not quiver in its aim. Conroy was silent, giving up his urging of the mare. Harry saw that his estimate of Ludlow as a weakling was entirely wrong. Ludlow, in digging toward his thirsts, had resurrected all the fighting qualities of his forbears—the sure brain, the steady hand, the merciless will of that far-back ancestor who had gained the title he had offered to Mara. No doubt the man was half mad, but that madness did not blind him or enfeeble him. For a moment, at least, his revived desires held him steady. It would not do to trust to any bull rushing or to any tactics less keenly thought out than his own to get possession of that water. Besides, in the interim, Dick had slipped back into the tent and provided Ludlow with more cartridges.

"What do you exactly want, Luddy?"

It was Mara who spoke from the back of the mare she now had under control. Her voice was low, her hand on the reins, as steady as his on the colt. Ludlow's narrowed, red-rimmed, sand-stung eyes opened, and his face was transfigured. The moon madness that the girl had stricken him with wiped the hardness from his strained face; the bitterness lifted from his scornful mouth; the boy he had once been flashed up for a moment from the mires he had drowned him in.

"You, Mara—you!" he whispered hoarsely.

The girl gave Biddy an imperceptible touch with her heel, and the mare took a slight step forward.

"I can't," said the girl. "I'm too sorry for you to love you."

"I'm in the gutter, but you can drag me out. You—only you. I've been looking for you all my life. All the women I've known were only attempts to find you," pleaded Ludlow, not, however, relaxing his covering of the two men.

HARRY felt a hot fire surging through him. The primitive man the desert had aroused in Ludlow was also born in him, as he saw Mara bending low and listening to the seductive wooing of a man

who knew well that, once pity is aroused, love may enter in. Harry was preparing to take a leap that would have to be quicker than a bullet; he was reckless from his thirst for the girl—the thirst of a man who has met love for the first time and who knows it will be his only love. He was ready to kill for that thirst.

"Only promise to marry me, and you can have the water," said Ludlow.

Harry became aware of a strange motion of the fingers of Mara's hand, that had dropped by her side out of Ludlow's sight. It was not suppressed agitation; it was not fear; she was trying to talk to him with those fingers. She was inculcating caution, begging him to hold in the fury that she knew must be possessing him.

"Marry me now," Ludlow was saying. "I once read for orders. I can repeat the service, and we have witnesses. If there is no ordained minister here to marry us, at least we can marry ourselves. It will be a Scotch marriage. Give me your hand and say it after me. Girl, if you have any pity, be my Beatrice and lift me out of my Inferno. There's nothing in hell or heaven I want to look at but you. I see nothing but you."

Harry remembered that Ludlow had been complaining about his eyes since that dust storm; perhaps he could not see to shoot as well as he claimed, but Mara was trying to blind him farther. She would have him actually see nothing but her, by focusing those inflamed eyes entirely upon herself.

With this guess of Harry's, came his imperative drive to action. He dived under the belly of the mare, took Ludlow on the side opposite to where he held the Colt, and pinioned his arms. The mare bucked back at the strange rush of something between her legs. Mara called, but Harry did not hear her, for he was wrestling with Ludlow and trying to prevent him from turning the Colt back where he could shoot. Ludlow desperate by this last play of his life, tripped Harry. Harry managed to avoid the full fall of Ludlow's body on top of him, but dented his ribs on the handle of the shovel that was still in the hole. Harry groaned involuntarily, and the groan gave Ludlow greater vigor. He managed to lift his arm against Harry's pinioning fingers. Harry let go the arm and clutched the fingers Ludlow held over the Colt, as he was preparing to press the trigger, when he judged he could shoot back without blowing off the back of his own head. Harry paralyzed the nerves of his opponents' fingers by pressing them against the steel. Now, Ludlow could not pull the trigger.

Presently Harry managed to wrench the Colt out of those almost mashed fingers, and it dropped somewhere in the sand. Ludlow with a quick turn got on top of Harry and grasped at his throat. The two men rolled over in the sand. Suddenly, when Ludlow was on his back, he relaxed all his muscles, as if he had gone unconscious. Deceived by this trick, Harry eased up Ludlow, and Ludlow threw handfuls of sand into Harry's eyes and mouth. Harry had to let go entirely, and Ludlow was able to leap out of the hole.

Ludlow had no need of further fighting. Harry was choking, and Conroy had leaped at Dick. The two older men were rolling over and over in the sand, and even up the incline of the granite, their arms locked.

Biddy, frightened as much by that conflict in the hole as she had been by the explosion of the car, had bolted up the soak. Mara had all she could do in that bareback seat, without stirrups to hold her. The tattooing of her heels brought up the other brumbies, and Mara was soon surrounded by the whole mob. She began to ease up Biddy by galloping over the rocks. The others galloped with her, helter-skelter down the incline. Ludlow, without arms, was facing a cavalry charge of the thirst-maddened horses of the bush. He had ample time to escape, but that compact mass of frenzied horseflesh, the clatter of their hoofs on the granite, the straining of their heads, the tossing of their matted manes and tails, all led by a girl whose red hair was blowing like an oriflamme of war—gripped the man and held him still.

"By my soul!" he cried. "The Australian Light Horse at Beersheba!"

A vivid reminiscence of that charge he had witnessed—a charge that had extorted from the enemy the admiring admission that the Australians were not soldiers, but madmen—held the Englishman to the utter forgetfulness of his own safety.

"Two things greater than all things are:
One is love, and the other is war—"

The words came involuntarily to his lips.

Biddy's food and drink gave her strength to gain a lead under Mara's throbbing with her heels. The girl reached down and caught at Ludlow's hand. He leaped up on the mare behind her, and the two were carried out over the plain.

The other horses stopped to nose into that empty bucket and grub about the camp. Conroy and Dick had heard that cataract of hoofs in time and jumped into the cart.

Harry, blinded and choking from the sand, had been saved by falling back into the bottom of the hole over which the horses had jumped. A rib was broken, and every breath was an agony. He had seen Ludlow galloping off with Mara—Ludlow with one arm round Mara, while with his free hand he seized the reins.

NOT until Harry had uncovered the tank's manhole and poured water into his eyes and washed the sand from his throat, did he get strength to rise. He found the revolver, saw that the sand had not ruined it, and put it inside his shirt. Mara had to be followed, and the only way was to catch one of those horses. A few were wild brumbies that had been never broken, while the draft horses would have no speed.

"All right, mate?" asked Conroy.

"Yes. Get me that halter and help me to catch one of those brumbies."

Conroy secured Dick's old halter, but there was not a piece of rope in camp strong enough to throw over any one of those horses and hold him. At every move of the men, the frightened beasts started kicking and plunging. Harry had to hurry; every moment was a gain for Ludlow, and Harry was threatened by that slow numbing pain which caught him every time he moved. He had to fight off the fear of going unconscious.

"Let's try the water, Jim," he suggested.

He secured the bucket, went back into the hole, and began ladling out water, a pannikin at a time, into the bucket. At the sound of the cool splashes the horses approached, a ring of thirsting noses crowding in on Harry and Conroy. Some of those horses were actually weeping. Their forelegs sank in the sandy sides of the hole. The two men were hemmed in by hot and dusty beasts; only the closeness of their crowding prevented the horses kicking. Those on the outer ring were actually lifting their hoofs and trying to climb over those nearer the bucket. Thirst!

Conroy managed to hold back the bucket till Harry picked out a likely roan that had slight saddle galls upon him. Never had he undertaken such quick judgment of a horse; he was looking for speed, wind and endurance, as well as a horse that could be ridden bareback and guided by a halter. One of those thirsting noses jammed his hurt side, and he gritted his teeth, as he leaped on the back of the roan.

"Give her the whole bucket, Jim," he called.

But the other horses wanted their share; the maddening gurgle of the water drove them in closer. When the bucket was emptied by the roan, they began to stamp and shoulder and kick; some were biting at Conroy. Harry could not urge the roan out of the press till he began to imitate the bark of a dingo. Conroy took the hint and started doing the same. The hoarse yelp of the wild dog of the plains, that would ultimately get these thirst-thinned carcasses, started them to separate. Presently they parted, and Harry rode out of the mob.

"You've got to have a water bag, Harry," cried Conroy.

The drawing of the water and filling of the bag made further delay, but Conroy was right. Mara had carried no water, so Harry waited, while Conroy tied the bag to his waist.

Harry trotted off, saving his speed until he learned more about the roan. Then he heard a shout behind him. Conroy was pointing to the brumbies. The thirsty mob he had left behind had smelled the water that was wetting the side of the roan, as it oozed from the canvas bag, and they were following him. Harry was leading a cavalry charge now —a cavalcade of thirst, heading for the crows and the dingoes and the ants.

IT was easy to follow the trail of Biddy over that plain, still smoothed by the sand of the willy-willy. He judged his roan would stand his heels, and Harry urged him farther. The mob behind closed in on him; some even frisked ahead of him, obliterating the track, and he had to ride hard to keep the roan ahead.

He soon caught sight of Biddy on the top of a rise; then she disappeared behind one of those monotonous waves of sand. Even Biddy would find it hard to keep her pace, with that double load of Mara and Ludlow. Harry and the mob he was leading were raising a cloud of dust that must have looked to Mara like the advancing whirlwinds of another willy-willy. Harry saw her looking back over Ludlow's shoulder, as he came closer. Ludlow was still holding her and the reins.

As Harry swept on, with the thirsty troop at his heels, Biddy, urged by Ludlow's voice and heels, broke into a trot which soon stretched to a gallop. The roan began to fall behind.

Harry had not even a whip to help him. At times the roan tried to throw him, and the effort to keep his seat caused him excruciating agony. With a tremendous effort he managed to bring the roan within a shooting distance of Biddy. He drew the Colt from his shirt, but he could not shoot at Ludlow from that uncertain seat without risk of injuring Mara, and he could not get another ounce of speed out of the roan to come close and drag her loose from that madman. The only thing to do was to shoot Biddy, but Mara had been looking back at him, shouting. He did not catch her words, but he did understand. He dropped the barrel of the Colt; he could not shoot Biddy, even to save her mistress. He kicked and urged the roan all he could; but that tired, starved bag of bones was now faltering. The other horses, too, began to drop behind. Biddy was increasing her distance; her mouth was white and tossing off flakes of foam; her flanks were shining, as if oiled. A loud cry came to Harry, as she cleared the last hillock. Harry was certain the girl was urging Biddy away from him. She was helping Ludlow with her voice and her heels, by all the persuasion she had over her mare to escape from Harry!

Harry now went mad. Had Ludlow, with the devilish power he possessed over women, brought Mara to consent to this wild gallop—this Scotch marriage in the desert? It was now brute against brute. Harry, rising above his physical agony, bent on nothing but defeating that man, on killing him, on winning that woman from him, if only by force—dug his heels into the roan and shouted excitedly into his ears.

She responded for a few yards and then slowly subsided into a slowing-down trot; she would soon be dropping in her tracks, to gasp her last in the pitiless sand. Harry drew out the Colt which he had put back into his shirt and began shooting the revolver and barking the wild call of the dingo, close to those drooping ears. Only this bolt of terror could get another mile out of the roan now. He bounded forward.

Harry caught up with Biddy at a pile of swags and blankets, their camp of last night, but only because Biddy had been halted, and Mara was helping Ludlow from the mare. The tenderness with which she did this aroused Harry to a fury. He tried to haul in the roan, but the roan seemed to have gone mad, too, and galloped past the camp. Harry hauled in his head and kept him circling. He saw Mara put her arms round Ludlow, and he thought she was protecting him. He managed to fling himself from the back of the roan and advanced on Ludlow, with the empty revolver in his hand—his only weapon.

"Don't, Harry!" screamed the girl. "Don't! He has gone blind!"

LUDLOW was sitting on the ground, trying to open his inflamed eyelids, which had closed with that terrible blight caused by the sun glare and the salted sand of the plains. But Harry was blind, too, with that killer's mist which comes to men at these dire moments and makes them heroes or beasts or both. Ludlow had risen at Mara's call and was stretching out his arms blindly to close with Harry, when the mare, who had stopped to nose for grub, as she smelled the atmosphere of a camp, let out with her heels, caught Ludlow on the side of the head, and the man of many appetites fell and lay still.

Harry reeled to the sand, as the blood lust faded out of him. Mara leaned over the man who had carried her out on that wild ride.

"You killed him," she said to Harry. "Why did you try to catch us? I'd have broken him in. You rode him to his death, Harry."

"He would have——"

"He wouldn't have done anything. Oh, you men—you men! He was a brumbie, too, like me. I was trying to get him to go back to his home paddock."

"And gone with him?" gasped the anguished man on the sand.

"I never said so. I am still engaged to Donald Macloed of Marinna."

She spread a blanket over the body of the man she had tried to bring back to the civilization he had broken away from. Harry painfully staggered to his feet. The desert was rising in reeling waves around him, but this was certain—that the Englishman had won her even in his death. The glamour that the derelict carried about him would always be with her; she would marry that elderly jog-trot manager to keep her word, but the romance that should go with marriage would be in the grave of the Englishman.

"I'm sorry for Luddy," he said huskily, "and I wish you luck."

The pain that was gripping him under his heart—the greater anguish of knowing he had lost her by his display of the raw man that was in him, compelled him to press his hand to his side, and his face went whiter than Ludlow's.

"Harry—you're not hurt!"

To Harry the very desert began to buck, and he was seeing riders in the distance. Black things were flitting before his eyes.

"Nothing—a rib got dented. It's nothing."

She threw her arms around him and mothered him to the sand, as she had Ludlow.

"Harry—Harry, I didn't say I'd marry Macloed. It's you I love. I liked Luddy, yes, and I wanted to cure him of—of me. I don't like wild men. I like men who can stand things. I never would have married him. It's you, you—because you're an Aussie—because you came after me—because you didn't shoot Biddy."

Harry gave up trying to stand things. No matter what those queer riders were in the distance, or whether the plain was the deck of a ship or the back of a brumbie. He was satisfied to let his senses go, quite sure that they would come back to her.

Harry next became aware of water and brandy at his lips. He saw pack horses with the Marinna brand, laden with supplies, and Macloed bending over him.

"You're all right, laddy," the Scotchman was saying. "A week's rest will knit bones like yours. Mara has been telling me how you cut out a brumbie and rode after her."

"Mac," said Harry, "I've been trying to cut out your girl."

"That's all right, too, mon. She tells me you've succeeded. There's no hard feelings from me. With no disrespect to her, I'm glad to be relieved of the responseebeelity. We'd never run double."

The two men shook hands.

"How did you ever find us so quickly?" asked Harry.

"Mon, with the things you left, tools in one place and a silk shirt in another, it was like a paper chase."

Harry understood how Ludlow's carelessness had brought this speedy relief from Macloed.

Ludlow was buried at once. The grave was made deep, and the cross of Dick's water cache, with another inscription,

would be his. No trace to his identity was found among his effects. The title he had offered Mara he had not specified. The inscription on the cross would have to be vague. Mara and Harry knew they were burying a man who had loved too much—too blindly—an ill-starred master of too many unbridled imaginings.

The party then rode on to the soak, Harry on a pack horse relieved of its load.

"Donald tells me the bore has struck water. We'll never go dry at Marinna now," Mara told Harry.

As they approached the soak, they came on Conroy and Dick half hidden in a cloud of dust, working the shaker in the sand. Dick was shoveling the dirt, and Conroy pawing the ripples to look for gold. Their animosity had gone; they were prospecting as mates. The two flatly refused to leave Jarvey's Soak till they had worked it out.

After battering each other to exhaustion, they had made tea—mutual tea and tobacco had decided them to share that shaker. Two men on a shaker get over the ground quicker, and the towny had ideas, Conroy said.

TO IMPROVE THE WILD MUSTANG

IN the northwestern corner of Montana, on the Blackfeet Indian reservation, our government is making an experiment which will be followed with considerable interest by all lovers of horses. This is a careful and thorough attempt to produce a fine grade of saddle horse, by crossing the aristocratic thoroughbred with the wild mustangs found in this region. From the army remount center at Fort Royal, Virginia, three thoroughbred stallions have been sent to the reservation, where the government expects a new generation of army riding horses may be bred under scientific supervision. This experiment, it is expected, will not only lead to the revival of American riding stock breeding, but will aid the Indians of the reservation, who are wards of the government, in establishing themselves in a new industry.

It is said there are no less than thirty thousand horses in wild herds wandering in the hills, or in the horse corrals of the Indians. These animals are the remnants of the herds that once roamed the Rockies, from which came the mustang cow pony of frontier times. It is said there are traces of the blood of the first Arab stock, first brought to the New World by Cortez and his conquistadors, among these wild horses. These were once fine riding horses, before they were crossed with almost every known breed of horse blood. In the conquest of the West, various breeds of horses went wild and joined these roving bands. To-day the Blackfeet wild stock is almost worthless, except for their hides. Every year thousands of them are sent to the fertilizer plants.

There is no shortage of draft horses in America, but the riding stock is another matter. Once, before the coming of the flivver, every farmer had a pride in his place and his stock-bred riding horses. Only in the rougher country, along the eastern slope of the Rockies and through parts of Oklahoma and Texas, is the horse the natural part of the community. Here the demand for sturdy saddle stock has persisted, because the age of steam and gasoline has made little impression on these remote regions, where the natural conditions of the land favor the horse rather than the automobile.

It is a remarkable fact that wherever English, Irish, and American blood is strong among our population, the love of horseflesh has persisted. The revival of country life has stimulated the pleasures of the hunting field and the bridle path. Good polo ponies are also in demand. If this Blackfeet experiment proves successful, a new line of riding horses, with a strain of mustang spirit and endurance, will do much to revive the noble pleasure of riding.

Easy Money

By Bertrand W. Sinclair

Author of "Hands Off!" "The Land of Frozen Suns," Etc.

When Charlie Shaw, the carefree cow-puncher, was accused of being a shallow josher, and therefore worthless for rounding up cow thieves, Charlie got angry and proved that even a "kidder" can get down to business.

THE cool autumn wind riffled across Lonesome Prairie. It fluttered the manes and tails of a dozen saddled horses standing in a compact group, awaiting the pleasure of their riders, who stood and squatted in various postures, casting occasional glances at a number of flat, wrinkled objects in the grass of a tiny hollow. They had come upon these objects quite unexpectedly and had stopped to examine them. One rider had gone galloping back toward camp. The rest waited.

"Gosh, old Elmer'll go straight in the air when he sees this," one remarked.

Two miles distant a herd was stringing south. Heavy-loaded wagons, tooled respectively by a cook and a night herder, with a comet's tail of saddle stock following behind, bore in the same direction. And from that direction three men were now riding full tilt toward the dismounted cow-punchers.

When they pulled up at the group, Elmer Duffy gave an immediate exhibition of what his rider had termed "going straight in the air." Elmer was past forty, a sandy-haired Texan, with a capacity for irritable conduct that remained mostly hidden beneath a placid exterior. He had a long, solemn face. He took his position as the active head of a big cow outfit rather more seriously than range bosses usually did. This attitude, together with his slumbering crabbedness, did not make him popular with his men.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

"Well," one sunny-faced young fellow explained, "as near as we can see, it's eight beef hides with the Seventy-seven brand, that's been skinned off their rightful wearers and laid out to dry in the sun by some kind soul. We happened on 'em an' sent Mike back to tell you, because we thought maybe you'd be interested."

Mr. Duffy prowled from one hide to the other. The skulls and shin bones and hoofs of the defunct animals were scattered about for all and sundry to behold, where the coyotes had gnawed them. But they knew very well that neither wolf nor coyote had pulled down a bunch of mature cattle like that. And, as the foreman of the Seventy-seven gathered the import of these remains, he grew red in the face, and his lauguage became eloquent but unprintable.

"Some dirty thieves has been butcherin' beef an' gettin' away with it," he stormed. "I'd give five hundred dollars cold cash to lay hands on 'em."

"If you'd advertise that in the River *Press*," the same youngster laughed, "maybe they'd come in and give themselves up for the reward."

Elmer glared at him.

"Don't get fresh," he growled. "This here's serious."

"So it seems," Charlie Shaw replied carelessly. "But there's no law against joshin'."

"This ain't no josh," Duffy declared, embellishing his statement with an earnest oath. "And I suppose all a man can expect when he finds that a bunch of thieves is loose on the range is for featherheads like you to make a joke of it. If it was your cattle that'd been killed, you'd sing a different tune."

Charlie Shaw's laughing mouth shut in a tight line.

"I would, Elmer," he said quietly. "I'd keep my mouth shut and go after 'em. I wouldn't waste my breath cussin'."

"*You* wouldn't waste your breath cussin'!" Elmer exploded. "No! All you c'n waste is the outfit's time an' your money at poker. If I had to depend on boneheads like you to protect the outfit's interests, the Seventy-seven would go to hell in two seasons. Josh—that's all you know how to do."

Charlie took a step toward him. He was tall and slim, older in years and experience than his boyish face told, and his merry blue eyes suddenly ceased to be merry.

"Don't get too personal in your remarks, Elmer," he warned. "I might get serious myself."

"Personal! Personal!" Duffy bellowed. "Say, lemme tell you somethin'."

As an offset to his unfortunate disposition, Elmer Duffy had a reasonable amount of common sense; otherwise, he could not have guided the destiny of the Seventy-seven. He realized that he *had* got too personal. And he couldn't back down without losing face. He had no high opinion of Charlie Shaw's intelligence. No serious-minded man ever has a high opinion of light-minded youth, and Charlie had been the play boy of the Seventy-seven all that summer—a competent enough range rider, with no proper sense of responsibility, according to Elmer. But Shaw had nerve. His record and his actions made even Elmer Duffy concede that. And Elmer didn't hunger for war over a mere matter of levity.

"You go onto the wagon," he said stiffly, refusing to pursue the contention farther. "Catch your horses, pack your bed, and we'll part company. Here's your time."

HE disregarded Charlie's palpably belligerent attitude, sat himself on the grass, drew a check book and indelible pencil from his pocket, and proceeded to write out a check.

"You drew most all you had comin' last trip," he said, as he handed over the green slip. "There's the balance."

"So you think I'm a bonehead, do you?" Charlie inquired gravely. "I wonder if I couldn't sort of change your mind about that."

"I don't want to have no fuss with you, Shaw," Elmer said curtly. "I can't have a man in the outfit I don't hitch with. You're young an' careless an' hot-headed an'——"

"An' you're middle-aged an' staggerin' under a tremendous weight of responsibility an' cranky as a bull with the seven-year itch," Shaw retorted. "I don't give a damn about you firin' me, Elmer. But nobody can talk to me——"

A couple of men horned in between them. Everybody in the crew liked Charlie Shaw. They respected Duffy, even if they didn't love him. No one wanted to see a fuss over nothing. And they could see the making of a powder

fog in that unexpected clash born of irritation and a loose tongue. They twisted Charlie Shaw about and spoke soothingly to him. While they strove with his outraged dignity, Elmer Duffy, exercising uncommonly good judgment, mounted his horse and issued orders.

Thereafter Charlie could only let it go as it stood, or make himself ridiculous by insisting on a ruction with a man who patently desired to avoid one. Duffy could indicate his distaste without having his nerve questioned.

But when the dozen riders were bobbing away in a row, Charlie sat on his horse, disconsolate, indignant and still resentful.

"Darn his hide," he reflected. "I was just about to tangle with him, I guess. By gosh, I'll make him sing a different tune yet. Bonehead? Huh! Thinks I don't know enough to come in out of the rain. Just because I pushed him over some beefed steers. Gosh darn him, I *will* show him."

Just how, Charlie hadn't the remotest idea. The present occasion did not look particularly auspicious. The drama of an old range song flitted unpleasantly through Charlie's mind:

Heaps of fun in the summertime,
Pockets full of gold.
But when you're broke in the wintertime,
Oh, mister, ain't it cold!

A raw October wind whistled mournfully across Lonesome Prairie. Charlie thought regretfully of the celebrated poker game in which he had recently dropped practically a summer's wages. Round-up was nearly over. The big outfits seldom took on men in the fall. Oh —well. But he would certainly show Elmer Duffy he could do something besides taking life as a perpetual joke.

Even a natural clown has his serious moments.

DARKNESS on the plains is like darkness on the sea. If the stars are hidden there is no guiding mark—nothing but an immensity of shrouded silence in which a rider is like a ship without a compass. Yet men cast away at sea in open boats win to a landfall by day or night. Men cross the plains when night spreads her ebony wings and do not miss their destination. Each has his own resources of location and direction; the mariner by dead reckoning, based on observation of wind and heaving swells at sundown, the plainsman by his knowledge of the roll of the ground and the directional trend of gently undulating slopes. The rider feels these under the feet of his horse, as the seaman feels the lift and fall of his vessel.

So Charlie, crossing alone a forty-mile stretch of Lonesome Prairie, was as sure of his course as if bright day had shown him the Sweet Grass in the north, the blue summit of the Bear Paws on the eastern sky line, and the dark broken line to the south, where Marias Valley cut the plains. He rode at a jog trot, bearing south, always south, toward a ranch he knew, although the cloud rack in the sky darkened the plains, so that the outstretched fingers of a hand were scarcely visible.

He had fifteen miles yet to go, if he had not miscalculated. Nowhere in the stretch he had covered was there any great difference in elevation. It was all flat, with scarcely perceptible hollows bearing away to the east, toward Lonesome Prairie Lake. But he approached now a terrain of less monotony, and he began to peer ahead for a well-known beacon, something akin to that which guided the Israelites on an historical occasion, a pillar of fire by night.

Scarcely exact to call it a pillar. It was no more than a flickering gleam—an uncanny momentary glow. It came from an exposed surface seam of lignite coal, mysteriously set on fire long ago and burning still in the bowels of the earth. In the dark, flame and ignited gas would regularly flare about the pit, a ghostly incandescence, flashing intermittently above the smoldering embers of the burning seam.

He marked it, at last, well ahead and a little to the right. He let the reins dangle loosely. The black horse he bestrode had been bred and broken in the Marias Valley. He would bear straight south, now, at a steady, smooth trot.

"I expect," he muttered to the beast's

dim ears, "you know we're headed for the TL, like the feller who went home when there was no place else to go, eh, Crepe? You wouldn't, bein' a one-ideaed animal, think of headin' back for the Seventy-seven round-up. Well, go to it, old boy."

Out of the dark a strange whispering sound arose. At first, Charlie took it to be the wind springing up again. Yet his ears no more than caught the sound, than he knew it was no wind rustling across the prairie. He pulled up. It sounded plainer, then—not so far ahead of him; it was unaccountable, mysterious, beyond identification. The curious fancy came to Charlie that it was like a giant snake crawling on its belly over the stiff dry grass. And that bit of imagery made him smile. Pythons in the jungle night! And the largest reptile in Montana was a four-foot rattlesnake.

But that whispering sound stirred his curiosity to a great pitch. He had not the remotest idea what caused it, and he was familiar with every legitimate noise a man might expect to hear anywhere on the plains after nightfall—the rush of wind, the sound of running water, the thunder of hoofs, insect voices, the tumult of a herd, or the tiniest stirring.

And, as he sat his horse, wondering what it could possibly be, the sound died away to nothing.

He shook up his horse. The pack animal came up on a slack rope. A hundred yards straight ahead Crepe shied and snorted violently.

"Now, what the dickens!" Charlie exclaimed testily. "You darned fool! What's eatin' you?"

He was tired. These coltish antics from a staid old cow horse annoyed him. He spoke this annoyance aloud. He jabbed Crepe chastisingly with his spurs. Leather creaked. The bit chains and spur rowels clanked. The black horse's hoofs thudded sharply on the hard ground, as he plunged under the prick of the rowels. Charlie swore.

IN that still air a man's voice carried a long way. There was nothing he could see to scare the horse. But the last of his harsh, reproving words was still in his mouth when something occurred to justify, in a measure, Crepe's strange behavior, although it explained nothing.

A rose-and-orange flower bloomed suddenly in the blackness on his left. A sharp *pow!* as a gun spoke in the abrupt, staccato manner of guns when they speak. Something whined, *wh-e-e-e!* away off. For a second Charlie hesitated, reins taut, wondering. A signal—somebody lost? Or——

His perceptions were exceedingly rapid and logical. The sluggish-minded did not usually function long in the range country. Nor was he a nervous or timorous man. He did not jump to the conclusion that he had been shot at, because he knew of no reason why any one should shoot at him. Nor was he apt to be nervous under fire, having had that unpleasant experience once or twice. At the same time he wanted to know just what *was* afoot. He felt reasonably safe in the shrouding cover of the dark, if he were intruding on anything or any one.

So he lifted up his voice in a lusty bellow.

"Hey, there! What you shootin' at?"

He got his answer at once. The gaudy flower of the Winchester gardens bloomed its momentary brilliance in the night—once, twice, a third time.

Charlie did not pause to investigate. He gave Crepe his head and departed thence. Two more shots followed upon the hurried beat of the hoofs. The whine of bullets overhead told Charlie that whoever fired back, there in the darkness, was firing at him, sight unseen.

"Visitors ain't popular here," he muttered. "Far be it from me to disturb anybody's privacy. *I* don't need no second hint, you darned fool. Save your powder."

Half a mile at headlong gallop, and he pulled up to listen. No sound of pursuit. No breath of air stirred. Nothing. He might have been a solitary soul in a darkened void. That silence could be felt. He rode on at the same jog trot.

"Now, what was all that about, back there, I wonder?" he said to himself.

He was still wondering when he dropped down the north bank of the Marias, forded a clear shallow river that

sang a welcome song in a night that held a touch of frost, and into which Crepe and the pack pony dipped their muzzles thirstily. And this puzzled wonder still persisted in Charlie's mind half an hour later, when he snuggled down in his unfolded bed beside the TL stable wall, inside which his horses contentedly munched hay. His last conscious thought was of that strange, whispering sound in the night, and the reason for those shots. And it was the first thing in his mind when he opened his eyes to bright sunshine pouring into the valley, and "Rock" Holloway inquiring jovially why in blazes he didn't use the bunk house instead of the open air for sleeping purposes.

"I just got in during the night, myself," Rock told him. "Been riding with the Maltese Cross. Come on and have some breakfast."

Nona Holloway smiled at Charlie. Neither she nor her husband asked questions. Charlie Shaw had ridden for her long before Rock came into the Marias country, when she was a slim, sad wisp of a girl, with a baby sister and a bunch of cattle on her hands and a strange quality of exciting the admiration and respect of every man she came in contact with. Rock had fallen in love with her and married her, and the TL had waxed prosperous under their joint control. And Charlie Shaw had drifted out of their employment for reasons that he could never think about, much less discuss. He didn't know why he drifted in there now, except that these two were his friends, and he knew he was welcome, and it was on his way, because, when he parted with the Seventy-seven, he had decided to head for Fort Benton in search of a job. He would not ask Rock for a job. A foolish pride forbade, although he had never been able to rid himself of a feeling that the TL was home.

So he ate breakfast and merely remarked that he was through with the Seventy-seven and on his way. And after breakfast, as he and Rock stood on the porch, Charlie looked out over the valley with a touch of regret. Four years is a long time, and just that period had elapsed since Rock Holloway came jogging across Lonesome Prairie to look his first on the silver band of the Marias, to find himself faced at this very ranch with a tragic emergency. And now, Charlie reflected, Rock had a wife and a son and three thousand cattle and a ranch that was a tiny kingdom in itself. They had fought side by side against high-handed thieves. Charlie had drifted, and Rock had taken root. Peace and prosperity and happiness had come to him and the girl to whom Charlie had been a loyal servant before Rock took a hand in the game. Charlie knew all about it. He had watched the drama enacted. Some men were lucky, and some were wise. He himself was neither, he supposed.

HE looked out on irrigated meadows which gave their harvest into ranked stacks of hay. The river bank was cluttered with painted buildings. Lines of fence, inclosing choice pastures, spread up and down the valley as far as he could see. He stole a look at Rock—a look that was wistful and wholly without envy. And Charlie was not thinking so much of land and cattle as the most desirable of Rock's possessions. Consequently he was surprised to keen attention by the words that presently Rock uttered.

"I guess things have been coming too easy for us, too long," Rock said. "We had a wild time here once, Charlie, and it looked like a tough game. Then we got organized, and it has been smooth as silk. I suppose there is always somebody who hasn't got anything, cooking up a scheme for getting something for nothing."

"What's wrong?" Charlie asked him bluntly.

"We're shy about a hundred head of beef this fall," Rock told him.

Charlie didn't need the significance of that explained to him. He was a range rider, born to the business. He recalled those sun-dried hides in the grass. The Seventy-seven was losing cattle—beef cattle, too.

"Gosh!" he murmured. "I wonder if we got another 'Buck' Walters among us again."

"I don't know." Rock frowned. "That

is to be found out. I know we are out that many because the bulk of the beef is shipped. There will be only a few picked up on the outskirts of the range before the Maltese Cross round-up quits for the season. I have been with them all fall, so I know nothing was overlooked. That's about forty-five hundred dollars in cold cash, Charlie—more than a small outfit like us can afford to lose."

"Got any idea?" Charlie asked.

"None worth shouting," Rock admitted. "It's so long since we had anything like this to deal with that it seems impossible such a thing could happen. Yet these cattle are gone. I have no reason to suspect anybody. But I am going to scout with my eyes and ears open, you can bet your life on that."

"There is always some feller ready to bust the Eighth Commandment wide open if he sees a chance," Charlie observed. "Has it struck you that all this railroad-construction work offers a chance for somebody to butcher beef on the range and sell it to them camps?"

"Sure," Rock declared. "But nobody has showed signs of that, that I know of."

"I'm not so sure. The Seventy-seven has lost beef, too."

He went on to tell Rock of finding those dried and wrinkled hides and Elmer Duffy's explosion, which had led to Charlie's parting with the outfit.

"I'm full-handed, or I'd put you to work," Rock said. "You were a darned fool to quit us, anyhow. I don't like to fire a man to make room for you, Charlie, but you stick around for a while, and I'll see."

"Oh, shucks, it's easy enough to get a job," Charlie replied, turning Rock's remark aside.

"And that hide thing is interesting," Rock said thoughtfully. "Perhaps those construction camps would bear watching."

CHARLIE didn't tell him about that odd whispering sound in the night, nor the shots that were fired at him. There was no apparent connection between what he heard and cattle stealing —none that Charlie could see. And it seemed an entirely incredible affair, anyway, viewed from the sun-warmed porch of the ranch house. Nevertheless an idea as fantastic as that experience in the black dark popped into Charlie Shaw's head—an idea that he felt powerfully urged to act upon. But he kept it to himself. If it proved imaginary, he would not have made himself ridiculous by talking. And Elmer Duffy's scornful, angry epithets of "bonehead" and et cetera, had got deeper under Charlie's skin than he cared to admit. He wanted to make Elmer swallow both his words and his opinions. And Charlie Shaw hated a cow thief. He had reasons, both personal and general. He carried scars on his body from the hands of such gentry. So did Rock. They were a unit in that. And they were equally close mouthed in important matters. They stood now silent, looking out across the river.

"The Cross missed any stock?" Charlie asked at last.

"No; nor the Narrow Gauge nor the Circle," Rock replied. "But the trouble is they have so many cattle they would not miss any unless the loss was heavy; whereas we know within a few head how many calves we should brand and how many beef we should ship. We are shy almost one fourth of our beef cattle, and that is too big a whack at us. I don't know what to think."

"It's aggravatin', all right," Charlie said. "By gosh, y'know, I think it would be a good thing to make a round of them gradin' camps on Lonesome Prairie. Let's do it, Rock, you an' me."

"I got to go to Helena," Rock said. "Be gone a week. If you don't get restless and move on, we'll go scouting when I come back."

"I'm restless right now," Charlie said. "If you'll have your cook put up about three days' grub for me, I'm goin' to turn back north on a expedition of my own. Maybe I'll know something when I get back, maybe not. I'll tell you, anyhow."

"All right," Rock said. He asked no questions. A man's business, unless he was on the pay roll of an outfit, was entirely his own. Rock knew that Charlie didn't turn in his tricks without a reason. But he knew better than to inquire that reason if Shaw didn't volun-

teer it. He watched Charlie ride, leading his pack horse, up the north bank of the Marias, some time later, with a certain amount of unsatisfied curiosity and a feeling that he should perhaps be riding alongside that fair-haired youth. And if Rock had known what worked in Charlie Shaw's mind, he would have mounted and followed him.

As it was, Charlie rode north alone. There had been a time when he never left that ranch in the valley without a rifle under his stirrup leather. When Buck Walters' shadow lay like a menace across that range a man needed to be armed. But for a long time the Winchester carbine had reposed in Charlie's bed, except when he occasionally hunted antelope or wolves. Now it was in its worn scabbard beneath his leg. And Charlie felt a little keyed up, a little expectant. If he were lucky he might have the laugh on Elmer Duffy at last. For things had assumed a different aspect since he learned that the TL was losing beef wholesale. On that was based the idea that had popped suddenly into Charlie's mind—an idea too far-fetched to divulge to Rock Holloway. Some one had begun to steal cattle again, where none had dared, after the private war that wiped out Buck Walters and his crowd. Here and there in the range country there was always some one who coveted his neighbor's ox, just as in more highly organized communities light-fingered folk always seek to filch goods that other men have accumulated by legitimate enterprise and honest industry.

If a man could not enjoy the fruits of his labor, he would know the reason why. Charlie considered the situation. There had been no known rustling on the Marias for four years, and perhaps it looked like good picking. With that to spur him, Charlie was inordinately curious to know who was so nervous as to smoke up an unseen solitary traveler crossing Lonesome Prairie at night—and why? The way to read a book is to open it and turn the pages. The way to learn what Charlie wanted to know was to look over the ground. There was, besides, a farther field to explore in the light of Rock's lost cattle.

He had the wispy intermittent blue of smoke from the burning coal seam to mark the place where those shots had been fired. By half past one he drew up on the low rise above the swale in which he had heard that peculiar sound.

NOTHING in sight. Autumn-bleached grass, miles of it; cattle grazing here and there. Distant saw-toothed mountain summits breaking the sky line. Away off to the north, below the horizon, Charlie knew that gangs of men with plows and scrapers and teams swarmed like an extended column of warrior ants, constructing the grade of a transcontinental railway. Charlie had in his own mind established a possible relation between the vanished cattle and this activity. It had come to him, far-fetched but possible, as he talked to Rock. But first, he wanted to look about here for some sign which might confirm his suspicions.

A casual inspection of the spot revealed nothing. The earth was baked hard. The short grass, dry and stiff, sprung back to erectness when released from underfoot. He was, however, quite sure of his location, having almost an uncanny sense about such things.

He swung in a circle. Dipping into the hollow at a slow walk, he pulled up. In that swale strange marks showed. The grass was pressed flat in swaths less than three feet wide, as if heavy objects had been dragged or rolled across the surface. He got down, bent to examine these peculiarities, and then walked on, leading his two horses, while he conned the ground. So moving, he came to a patch of prickly pear. Stooping, he examined the crushed spiny leaves. A squinting look brought wrinkles between his eyes.

"Huh!" he grunted.

Then he mounted and followed the marks at a trot. As the crow flies, the flattened swaths ran straight for the burning lignite, where the blue vapors drifted, and it was no great distance to the place.

He halted a few yards short of a crevice with ragged edges. Twenty feet on either side the grass had perished long ago. Charlie dismounted and approached with caution. To have the ground break

at the lip under his feet meant that he would perish, like a fly cast in a camp fire. The opening, narrow and fairly deep, gave off fumes and smoke, like the breath of some uneasy subterranean monster. Now and then an upward whiff of gas ignited and burned with a wavering flame. Anything dropped in that crevice was utterly beyond rescue.

The marks that Charlie followed ran up to the brink, which proved solid earth when he stamped cautiously. Hoofprints and boot marks appeared, with disturbed places in the powder-dry soil. A few broken places showed where comparatively weighty objects had been pushed over the edge. And that was all he could see.

Charlie stood a few minutes staring thoughtfully. He frowned into the pit. Few signs, but highly significant ones to him. Queer. Then he mounted his horse and back-tracked. He partly guessed what had made that whispering sound in the night. Now he desired to disprove or verify that guess.

That was what he had in mind when he loped back to where he took up this trail. By the bend of the grass blades he knew they had been dragged up that swale. Where there was an end, there must be a beginning. Charlie made a bet with himself that these marks would begin somewhere near the spot from which those shots had been fired at him.

He won his bet. The narrow swaths lay along the draw. The depression narrowed, then deepened. Charlie remembered then that a soak spring seeped out of a bank down there, affording water to a hundred head or so of stock. He recalled something else. Three years earlier a horse outfit had located on that spring and built a small corral there, part sod, part poles. Then they had abandoned the place for a better one, forty miles east.

He came around a low shoulder of hill. The old corral still stood. It was still in fair shape, and it had been in use. That was plain enough. The marks he had followed began at the gate. The loose dust on the floor was trampled. And from just outside the gate the tracks of a wagon led away northward.

"Huh!" He grunted his favorite monosyllable.

He walked about the place, noted every mark in the dust, and poked with his toe, here and there, at certain slightly discolored patches in the corral.

"This," he muttered to himself, "is a highly interestin' state of affairs, I wish to remark."

He sat on his horse for a minute after he mounted again. He looked off toward the Marias, in two minds at the moment. Then he reflected that Rock Holloway was on his way to Helena. And for various reasons Charlie concluded to play a lone hand. So he made a complete circle of the place, carefully scanning the ground; when he came back to the wagon track, he followed that, riding at a steady trot.

IF he expected that to lead him to any new place, person or conclusion, he was disappointed. In the few years since Charlie first crossed the Marias River, with all the territory north of it an unpeopled waste, the first waves of the ultimate flood of settlers had begun to seep into the country. Up in the Sweet Grass, where he and Rock Holloway had fought a battle with organized thieves, there were now many ranches, small and large. A wagon trail ran between the Sweet Grass and Fort Benton—a trail which crossed the Marias halfway between the TL and the Seventy-seven. The single wagon track Charlie followed angled off until it merged with the Sweet Grass Trail. It was lost in these twin ruts. Wagons came and went daily on that road. One wheel track is as another. For purposes of identification, the trail was lost.

But Charlie kept riding. Far off the construction camps began to show—dim smudges on the horizon. As he drew nearer, he could see the dark streak of the grade and the moving teams. And when the Sweet Grass Trail crossed the right of way, Charlie turned aside and jogged toward a cluster of buildings, like a small village sitting by a stream, where the buffalo lodges of the Blackfeet had been pitched in years gone by.

Half a mile from this camp he came

on a small herd of cattle grazing under the eye of a solitary rider. Perhaps a hundred head of cows, aged, scraggy, culls in fair flesh. He marked three or four different brands from the Judith Basin.

"Camp beef?" he asked the herder.

"Yeah," the fellow drawled. He was a pimply-faced youngster with a visible swagger. "Beef for the bohunks."

"Butchered as needed, I suppose?" Charlie commented.

"Sure. This is a headquarters commissary. Big layout. Feeding two or three camps from here."

Charlie passed on. On a bit of good grass along the creek bottom he staked his horses and cooked his supper. Grading camps offered none of the hospitality the range afforded. No casual wayfarer got anything there unless he paid his way. They were there to build a grade for the Great Northern, for the profit of the contractors, and it was a grubby, driving business.

Charlie ate his supper by the fire, watched the men and teams string in at six o'clock. It was a big camp. He estimated four hundred men. Four hundred men ate a lot of beef. And two other camps drew supplies from there. He looked at the camp and at the grazing herd, and then he did a lot of thinking. He still lay thinking, looking up at the stars, long after he turned in. With the tarpaulin drawn up to his chin, he stared at the Big Dipper, the North Star, and at many a constellation glittering in its appointed place. But his mind was not on the stars in their courses—upon the cosmic wonder of an October night. No. More practical matters engaged his busy brain. And not until the sharp nip of the autumn frost made him draw his head under the canvas did he fall asleep.

In the morning, with his own matutinal coffee bestowed where it would do the most good, and the grading crews stringing out to work in a cold dawn, Charlie walked into the camp and sought the head cook.

"Who does the beef buying for this outfit?" he asked.

The man pointed to a small tent-roofed wooden shack.

"Chief's office," he said and turned to his work.

CHARLIE rapped on the door. Some one said: "Come in!" Charlie entered. A rotund man sat at a rudely constructed desk littered with account sheets. He half turned on the box that served for a chair.

"What can I do for you?" he inquired briskly.

"Buy some beef off me," Charlie answered. "Patronize home industry an' help the country flourish."

The man bit the end of a pencil reflectively.

"Well, I don't know about that," he said.

"I'm telling you so you will know," Charlie returned impudently. "Beef is my business. I raise it, buy it, and sell it, on the hoof or dressed—any old way that seems profitable. You must need a heap to feed this gang."

"Sure. But I don't buy beef as casual as you'd buy a pair of socks," the other declared. "I've got a considerable supply on hand and contracted for."

"I can deliver you prime dressed beef right here in your camp for four cents a pound," Charlie offered crisply.

"I can get it for less'n that." The commissariat manager shook his head. "Don't use prime beef, nohow."

"Still, if you could get first-class beef at third-class prices, you'd make money by buying it," Charlie pointed out. "It goes farther. How about three and a half cents?"

"Don't interest me much."

"Say, now," Charlie drawled, "I got quite a bunch of stuff I can turn over at a pretty low figure. And I know where I can get more. Say three cents a pound."

"Well, that's fair enough," the chubby one admitted. "But I think maybe I could do a mite better still, if I had to. And I've got some stock ahead. No; I guess we can't do business, stranger. Thanks, just the same."

"You're the doctor," Charlie said and stepped out.

As he walked back to his horses, he emitted sundry unbelieving grunts.

Three cents a pound was ridiculous; and yet the fat one thought he could get it for still less. There was a screw loose somewhere. Three-year-old beef steers were netting forty dollars in Chicago; cows about thirty. A fair three-year-old would dress six or seven hundred pounds; a cow four or five hundred. At three cents they would bring about eighteen and fifteen dollars respectively. Charlie had named those prices to the contractor as a bait, and if he hadn't caught a fish, he had at least got a nibble that quickened his pulse. No rancher would sell beef for half what it would bring in the open market. If that railroad camp got beef at anywhere near that price, it was stolen beef. And any man buying supplies on a large scale would be familiar enough with current prices to know that it was stolen. Still, a suspicion was not convicting evidence.

On his way in and out of that camp, Charlie had used a pair of naturally keen eyes. He marked the meat house by its screened windows. He would have liked a look inside, but that was hardly feasible. He considered, however, how he might get such a look and decided upon the only method open to him. There was a risk, to be sure. But a period of uneventful placidity had not wholly atrophied in Charlie Shaw a capacity for discounting risks. There had been plenty during his first years in Montana. He decided to take a chance.

He saddled, packed, mounted and ambled slowly south again. The camp-beef herd grazed abroad. Again Charlie met the pimply faced youth resplendent in Angora-faced chaps, with a long-barreled six-shooter dangling at his hip. He sat sidewise in his saddle, as proud as if he had been riding point on a trail herd from the Panhandle.

"With all that crew to feed," Charlie remarked over a cigarette, "the butcher gang ought to cut your herd down pretty fast."

"Oh, so-so," the herder said. "About a couple a day."

Charlie jogged on. A couple a day. If that camp didn't consume at least fifteen hundred pounds of beef per diem, he was a poor judge of appetites. Beef was the cheapest food in the country. Men who worked ten hours a day behind plow and scraper could eat like the vikings of old. Two scraggy cows a day? Hardly.

TWO miles south in a convenient hollow he picketed his horses. The rest of that day he lay low, keeping a more or less casual watch from a grassy rise. Nothing like a wagon arrived or departed. When dusk fell again, he packed his outfit and rode back to the construction camp.

He didn't wait until everybody went to bed. He desired a little private inspection. His chance of going unmolested was better while men still moved about the camp. If he were challenged, he would act as judgment dictated.

He gained a corner of the cook house unseen. From there it was only a step or two to the meat house. Chance favored him. A light burned in the place. Charlie stole up and peered through a screened window. The same brusque cook he had spoken to that morning was slicing steak on a block. Back of him, in rows, hung quarters of beef. At least six head of dressed beef hung from the pointed hooks in the beams above. Charlie knew beef on the hoof, in the round, in the pen. They were prime steer quarters, as good beef as ever went into Chicago. Nothing in that meat house had come out of that herd of scraggy cows. That was certain.

He stole back to his horses. Clear of the camp, he paused to look back, frowning at the scores of lights—yellow dots against the darkened plain.

If he had read the sign right, first at the burning coal seam and now here, some enterprising persons were collecting a lot of easy money. Charlie knew how Rock Holloway felt about such things. No man likes to have his pocket picked. It is poor satisfaction merely to know how the picking is done. Charlie suspected that Rock felt very much as old Elmer Duffy had felt when he blew up over the hides in the grass, only he sympathized with Rock, and he still held that old Elmer had no business to insult him. Yes, Rock would feel like the Saturday shopper whose purse has been snatched—

he would be furiously eager to get his hands on the snatcher. And the burden of Charlie's thought was how this could be done.

Lightning seldom strikes twice in the same place, but thieves frequently do, especially range thieves. It was this conviction that sent Charlie loping away southward in the dark.

Twenty-five miles is no great matter to fresh horses. Charlie swung in on the Benton-Sweet Grass Trail, held it till he was abreast of the burning coal seam, then turned straight east. By midnight the ghostly flicker wavering above that incandescent crevice was a beacon before him.

He skirted it, moving slowly, with a watchful eye, and dropped into the draw. When he judged that he was within a few hundred yards of the old corral, he dismounted, hobbled both horses, and left them. They wouldn't stir after that ride. He could easily find them again. Then he took his carbine in hand and stole toward his destination, as cautiously as if he were stalking a wolf. He had, indeed, the certainty that he stalked not a lone wolf but a pack, and he was well aware that wolves have teeth. The wolves he sought might be hunting, and they might not.

The old corral loomed before him. Keeping close under the southern bank, he was one with the night. A shadow lay where he moved. One stealthy step at a time. He reflected that a hunch is a strange thing. When it worked properly it gave curious results.

A lantern glowed dimly on the floor of the corral. Within the radius of its gleam two men were skinning the carcass of a dead beast. Other bulky carcasses lay in the dust; some were reddish white, where the hide had been flenched out on either side; some were still waiting the knife, where the ax or other killing instrument had felled them, not long before.

Charlie stole nearer, one thumb hooked over the hammer of his carbine. He could see the dim outline of a wagon backed up by the gate and the faint forms of saddled horses. There should be more than two men. Yet the fewer sharing in that nefarious business, the greater the profit. Too many cooks usually spoiled that kind of broth.

In two more steps he could thrust his carbine through the pole and cover them. With their hands in the air, the rest was simple. A really exultant thrill stirred Charlie Shaw. He remembered Elmer Duffy's angry epithets. To-morrow he would make Elmer sing a different tune.

And the next moment he was borne to earth. A sharp rap on the head put a full stop to his pleasant anticipations.

WHEN Charlie revived to consciousness he found himself in a situation unique and dangerous. He lay flat on his back. His head was free. He could twist it about. The pole height of the corral towered over him. Within the inclosure, not two men, but three slashed hurriedly with skinning knives, and they were working at the last carcass.

But, apart from looking on, he was quite helpless. His arms were straight down by his sides. His legs were straight. He was not tied, being more effectually trussed than with a rope. He was wrapped tight in an excellent substitute for a strait-jacket, inasmuch as they had folded him in a raw beef hide, wet and strong with animal smell, and they had laced it tight, from his ankles to his neck, with thongs of the same material. A mummy swathed in its ancient bandages was no more thoroughly bound than he.

Charlie watched them deftly quarter the carcasses. The head, feet and offal of each steer were piled in the middle of the hide, and the edges drawn together. Once one man looked through the pole fence at him and grinned. He couldn't make out their faces in that dim light, but he could see what they did. The quarters of beef were stacked in the deep wagon box. One mounted his horse and dragged the bundles of hide outside. They scratched the dust of the corral back and forth to obliterate bloodstains and telltale signs. Eventually he could hear the jingling of harness, and a four-horse team was hitched to the wagon.

Charlie regretted a little that he had been so sanguine; still—— His eyes marked every move. One man mounted

the high seat. The wheels rolled away in the dark.

And when the cluck and clack grew fainter, the other two led saddle horses out of the gloom.

"Take him first trip?" one said.

"Better," the other replied. "I'll snake him. You bring one of the hides. We'll have to get a wiggle on, too, or it'll be daylight."

The noose of a rope was slipped over Charlie's feet. He was yanked along over the grass. Once a clump of prickly pear raked his cheek. Otherwise he suffered no bruise. The ground was smooth. The thick hide protected his body. Behind him the second horse plodded, dragging his burden by the saddle horn. Again Charlie heard that mysterious, slithering, whispering sound, like a huge snake scraping over dry grass. Only, now, he himself was helping to make this noise in the night.

His two horses loomed in the draw. The cavalcade stopped.

"Here's his outfit," said one. "What'll we do with 'em?"

"Turn 'em loose when we're through," the other replied. "They'll amble off to their own range, an' whoever finds 'em will have to guess. Simplest."

They moved on. The draw flattened out to the level of the plains, and the flicker of the burning lignite showed ahead. They drew up twenty yards back from the crevice.

A wind blew faintly out of the west. Charlie could smell the gas wafted from that underground furnace. A very neat incinerator. It would not be the first time that thieves, surprised red-handed, had acted on the principle that dead men tell no tales.

Yet in his shroud of green rawhide, Charlie made no protest and lifted no plea for mercy when the riders dismounted and stood over him. A wavering tongue of fire lifted above the crevice, casting a fitful glow on horses and men. They dragged the bundle of hide and offal to the rim and dumped it in. A strong odor of scorching hair and hide wafted up. They came back to Charlie.

"Take his head," one muttered. "I'll get him by the feet."

They stooped.

When the head of one bent over, and his fingers touched the hide, something went *pow!* in his face. He fell backward, as if clouted with a hammer. Simultaneously Charlie's arm thrust straight at the man reaching for his feet, and that outstretched hand held a six-shooter.

"Hands up!" he commanded, and the man obeyed.

Charlie sat up. The rawhide fell away from him, parted at the lacings. He wiggled his legs out of the narrow pocket.

"Keep 'em up, too," he said cheerfully, "unless you'd rather join your partner."

Charlie stretched his legs casually. He glanced at the body behind him. Not much need to look. The muzzle of the gun had been fairly in the man's face when he fired. He stepped behind the other man, disarmed him, and then ordered him to walk over beside his horse and mount. With the fellow's own reata he tied both wrists securely behind his back.

"Next time you sew a man in a cowhide and figure to dump him in a burning coal seam to roast alive," Charlie said, "you'd better search him to make sure he hasn't got a gun in a Texas holster under his armpit. And try to remember that green hide stretches quite a lot if a man has any strength in his arms, and he has an hour or so to work it loose."

He mounted the other horse and hazed his prisoner down the draw until he picked up his own outfit. Then he headed straight for the Marias, riding fast. Riders on fresh horses could beat that wagonload of stolen beef to the railroad camp. The Seventy-seven roundup would just about be camped at the ranch. It was a little closer to the Seventy-seven than to Rock Holloway's, and Charlie felt that it would really be a lot of responsibility off his shoulders if he delivered his prisoner and his information straight to the hands of Elmer Duffy.

CHARLIE lifted his head from a bunk in one corner of the Seventy-seven ranch house. A wagon was clattering into the yard. Elmer Duffy and half a dozen riders flanked it like a bodyguard.

The box was piled high with beef. A tarpaulin was stretched over the quarters. On top of the tarp lay several fresh hides. Beside the man driving the wagon sat a sullen-looking captive.

Charlie went out to meet them without undue haste. He looked the layout over from the porch and stooped to buckle on his spurs. Elmer Duffy swung down from his sweaty horse.

"Well, kid," he said genially, "we got 'em with the goods. That contractor slid out, but the stock inspectors are after him. Come back by the furnace an' the old corral an' pick up the hides an' the feller you bumped off. Some of them cattle was Seventy-sevens, but mostly TL stuff. These fellers had a lot of the money on 'em they got for this beef. You sure done a nice stroke of business last night."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, "for a bone-head josher—yes."

He walked on to the stable. His two horses stood in stalls. He had them out, saddled, and his pack part hitched, when Elmer Duffy came striding from the house. He had a green slip in his hand which he held out to Charlie. It was a check for five hundred dollars.

"Say, you ain't pullin' your freight, are you, Charlie?" Elmer inquired.

"Oh, no," Charlie replied ironically, his eyes on the check. "I'm fixin' to make myself at home with the Seventy-seven for all time, naturally. What's this?"

"I made a crack before the whole outfit, didn't I," Elmer stated, "that I'd give five hundred dollars to lay my hands on whoever was killin' beef? Well, I'm makin' good on it. You got it comin'."

Charlie stared at him and the check, but he said nothing.

"Look here," Elmer said hurriedly. "You got a steady job with the Seventy-seven as long as you want. You'll have to be on hand to give your evidence, anyhow, at the trial. An' I guess maybe you're a smarter kid than I reckoned. Maybe I was kinda hasty the other day. I can use fellers like you in this outfit."

"I don't want neither your money nor your job nor your gratitude, Elmer," Charlie said politely.

"You better think that over, Charlie," Elmer said, not quite so politely. "There's a long, hard winter comin', remember."

Charlie tucked in the last hitch on the pack, stuck his foot in the stirrup, and swung up to his saddle on Crepe. The black horse shook his head, jingling the bit, and pawed the hard earth impatiently. Charlie looked down with an expansive grin.

"Listen, Elmer," said he. "I wouldn't work for you ever again, nohow. I told you, when you were fonchin' around the other mornin', that I'd show you. I've done it. I rounded up your thieves, while you were runnin' around in circles, cussin' the luck. If you feel that you're under any obligation to me, forget it. I did that little job for nothin', just to show you I could.

"And," he concluded, "as far as that hard-winter thing is concerned, I was born in El Paso. I come up the trail when it was a tough proposition. I'm twenty-six years old, an', by Judas priest, I ain't never died a winter yet!"

ON A CASH BASIS

ONE harassed mother decided to put her young son on the honor system. The refractory youngster was not amenable to corporal punishment and she decided to railroad him into goodness. On Monday morning she told him, just as he set out for school, that he would receive a quarter on Friday afternoon, if his report for good conduct from his teacher was satisfactory. When Friday afternoon arrived, mother and son met in conference. The mother looked at her recalcitrant young hopeful, with the unsatisfactory school report in her hand.

"John, do you think you deserve the quarter I promised you?"

John pondered deeply for a moment, and then said: "Gimme fifteen cents."

Thimblerig

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

Author of "Maurice and the Bay Mare," "The Stray," Etc.

Dreams do come true—not the dreams we have in our sleep, but the hopes we always hold in our hearts. Thimblerig, a city vagrant, though he met more troubles than the average man could stand, held gallantly to his secret dream.

IF things don't break right the next flutter, it's me for the soft plank and the singsong." Thimblerig was talking to himself. He liked to talk to himself, because he drew a kind of melancholy solace from sympathizing with his own trials and troubles. Soft plank and singsong meant a hard bed in a rescue mission and a sad face. And Thimblerig simply couldn't assume a sanctimonious air. "Holy howlers" always made him grin. He couldn't spell "hypocrisy," but he knew it when he saw it. He would have made more of a success in his calling, which was chiefly at back doors, if he had been able to subdue his grin. When a man is hungry, and says he is hungry, and grins happily, it takes a broad-gauge philanthropist to overlook the grin and produce the handout.

Not so many hours past, Thimblerig had been presented with an overcoat and a derby hat. His means of obtaining them had been simple enough. While sweeping a saloon floor that morning he had picked up a round, brass check with a number on it. The number happening to be 221. He put the check in his pocket. When he left the saloon he had two nickels. As he walked down the street, he jingled the two nickels and the brass check, which felt like a quarter. At noon he drank a glass of beer and ate all the free lunch he dared commandeer. About six that evening he drank another glass of beer and ate more free lunch. Then he set out for the residential district.

Thimblerig was possessed of a strange and apparently incomprehensible desire to enact a new scene in an old setting. People were weary of the usual plaint of the hobo. And Thimblerig was weary of it. He would try something different. Hunger, desperation, the chill

of approaching winter, and indifference to the absurdity of his appeal, combined to distort his sense of humor into something decidedly grotesque. He would present his brass check and demand his hat and overcoat in the grand manner, quite as though he were about to depart from a banquet at the Ritz. He expected to get thrown down hard. And yet, some one might fall for his act; might be so startled by the ridiculousness of his request for a hat and overcoat, that they would produce these essentials as a sort of secondhand donation to originality. Was it not one of the legends of the "Brotherhood" that "Gentleman Harry," pinched as a vagabond, had braced the cop for a quarter —a small loan from one gentleman to another—and the cop had so admired Gentleman Harry's sheer nerve that he had come across with a half dollar? And when the cop, to maintain his prestige, had told Gentleman Harry to beat it and not show up around there again, or he would have to take him in, Gentleman Harry had politely declined to beat it, but had told the cop that now he was no vagrant, as he had money in his pocket. You never could tell just which way the bones would flop. Of course, it all depended on the way you did it. The itinerant brotherhood still tell with gusto how "Punch," the professor, and Gentleman Harry turned that half dollar into an orgy.

Thimblerig licked his thin lips. He was cold, hungry, and, above all, thirsty. Desperation rode him with a relentless heel. He kept the brass check warm in his hand. The brass check, at least, was real. The streets were twilight avenues of unreality. The folk upon the streets were phantoms. Thimblerig had hypnotized himself into believing that his brass check was a fetish as potent as bright gold.

He tried several back doors. But there are none so arrogant and haughty as menials when approached by their physically shabbier brethren. However, somebody would fall for his patter, sooner or later. The eighth back door yielded the actual presence of the master of the house, who happened to be an undertaker, or, if you feel that way about it, a mortician. This undertaker enjoyed a joke. Secretly he was facetious; never, of course, during office hours. Only a professional funny man can afford to be facetious during office hours.

THE undertaker answered Thimblerig's knock, for his wife was afraid to go to the back door after dark. After dark meant nothing to the undertaker. And his attitude and manner at once told Thimblerig what he was. Thimblerig was disconcerted, but he grinned. To his amazement, the undertaker grinned. It was dark, and no one would see him indulging in such an unpardonable luxury. Thimblerig didn't count. How could he? He wasn't dead, and most obviously he didn't have any well-to-do relatives.

"What can I do for you?" queried the undertaker.

"Nothing in your line, thanks," replied Thimblerig. He struck an attitude—a haughty, hurry-up-my-car-is-waiting attitude. He presented the brass check with the careless gesture of a wealthy man at the check-room door. "My hat and coat, please. They are together."

"Oh, are they?" said the undertaker sweetly. He took the check and glanced at the number in the dim light of a lone anæmic bulb above his head. "Two twenty-one?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Yep. And it's two to one you'll lose your job if you don't get a move on. Get my things, or I'll have to speak to the management."

"That will not be necessary. I am the management. Just wait here a minute," advised the other.

"While you call a cop? Not on your life! Gimme my check!"

"Do you want that hat and coat?" asked the undertaker brusquely. He could be brusque, at a pinch. His wife knew it.

"Sure I want a benny and a lid. But I was only——"

"Don't spoil the act!" said the undertaker, who had once been an unsuccessful tragedian.

"Well, hurry! I'm freezin' to death," said Thimblerig, taking his cue.

"Perhaps I ought to wait, then," said the undertaker. "But, no—it wouldn't pay." Softly he vanished, and softly he returned with a fawn-colored, knee-length overcoat, long out of style and garnished with large, pale mother-of-pearl buttons. In the dim light the buttons looked like silver dollars.

Thimblerig inspected the coat.

"Where's me hat?" he queried.

"Here," said the undertaker, producing a derby that looked blacker than it was. "But if you hadn't reminded me you wouldn't have got it. This hat and coat once belonged to a cab driver, now defunct. He was English—once."

"Well, the stuff is all right," declared Thimblerig. "But the service is rotten." He donned the coat and hat with the swift ease of his kind and tossed his old hat into the garbage can.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" queried the undertaker, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, as though trying to coax a tip from a reluctant pocket.

"Yes, me gloves. But I can't wait. I never play the same number twice."

"Well, call around next fall," said the undertaker. "Here is my card. Glad I met you. Sometimes I wish I could play the old one-nights again and hoof it when the box office blew up. But I can't. My business keeps me here, day and night."

"You are up against a stiff proposition, most of the time, ain't you?" And again Thimblerig grinned.

"Vulgarian!" thundered the undertaker, who hadn't thundered for years. He was actually enjoying himself.

"And what kind of a vegetable is that?" asked Thimblerig.

"Take 'em and welcome!" said the undertaker. "So long! Good luck!"

Thimblerig doffed his hat and bowed.

"Go to hell!" he said, grinning.

The undertaker seemed pleased. He nodded and closed the back door softly.

For a moment Thimblerig felt lonesome. He hadn't had to talk to himself to be understood. Never had he had any use for undertakers. But this one had been a good sport. Bet he had a fat wife who belonged to the Daughters of Everything—and then some. But business is business. And Thimblerig's business was to find a place to sleep. He would have to live up to the pearl-buttoned benny and the dip lid. But they weren't quite as much of an asset as might at first seem. They made him look too prosperous. Who would fork over a quarter to a man sporting a box coat and black derby, when the wearer declared that he was hungry and didn't have the price of a flop? "Not so many, sister. Not so many!"

IT was about then that Thimblerig made his "flutter." There were not too many people on the street. The five-thirty workers had thinned out; they had gone to their homes, or their boarding houses, or familiar downtown eating places. A few, temporarily affluent, sought the long counter and the brass foot rail, whereon to rest their tired feet, one at a time, and tease their weary souls with false hopes at five cents per hope—a high one with a short kick; for ten cents they got a short one with a longer kick. Such days come not again.

Thimblerig's first flutter was a short and sorry flight. The man was buttoning up his overcoat, as he came out. The swing doors had not ceased waving good-by to him before Thimblerig discovered that his pearl buttons blinded the eyes of charity. He had asked for assistance, the price of a sandwich and a bed. The man had stared pointedly at the large pearl buttons and passed on. Thimblerig veered off and crossed the street to change his luck. His next flutter met with no better success. This time his anticipated benefactor was sorry, but he was broke himself. It may have been true. Thimblerig knew that kind. Again he approached a swing-door devotee. This one was mellow. In fact, he was so mellow that all men looked alike to him. They were his brothers. Solemnly he listened to Thimblerig's plaint. He thought that Thimblerig was offering to buy him a sandwich and put him to bed. And solemnly he thanked Thimblerig; but, an honest old sport, he didn't want a sandwich—might upset his stomach—and it was too early to go to bed. Affectionately he suggested that they forget

all about it and sing. Thimblerig declined the invitation and, leading the potential singer over to the nearest lamppost, he left him there for better or for worse.

"If things don't break right the next flutter——" Thimblerig decided to change his tactics. Thrice he had soft-pedaled in a minor strain. The next time he would pull out all the stops and tear off a couple of bars of "The Wedding March." He would pick a live one and tell him a live story. Two long, city blocks, and he saw the live one coming —brisk, portly, full-jowled, and in patent-leather shoes. Thimblerig headed straight for him, raised his hat, as they all but collided, seized the proverbial, psychological second by its metaphorical ears, and grinned. He lowered his voice a full octave below the mendicant's wistful note.

"I'm a bum. I'm broke. I stole this overcoat off a Pike Street dummy. I ain't hungry, and I don't want the price of a flop. If you was to give me a quarter, I would canter into the first bar I saw and take a high dive into a bucket of suds. Suit yourself."

The gentleman thus accosted, did not smile. Neither did he frown. He fished a quarter from his pocket. "Canter!" he said. And Thimblerig cantered.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood," leads to the hoosegow. Thimblerig knew it. Consequently he always let his left hand know what his right hand was doing. He preferred beer as a lubricant for the main bearings of adversity. As a matter of caution, rather than of principle, he indulged moderately. Beer was meat and drink and solace. And it lasted longer when one was privateering round a free lunch counter. When Thimblerig's ears began to buzz he ceased taking on cargo, cast off, and steamed for the open sea. If she rolled a bit, let her roll. Always he remained captain of his feet.

But those days come not again. And possibly Thimblerig wouldn't welcome some of them back, if they could return. As for the beer, Thimblerig says a wicker-covered jug of "vino tinto," in the shade of a California sycamore, beyond which a band of amiable sheep graze in the sunshine, isn't so bad. By contrast, perhaps, with that memorable evening of the overcoat.

HIS quarter went into the till, and back came four nickels and a tall glass of light beer, clear amber, topped with a creamy foam that mushroomed in ephemeral bubbles—bubbles which winked at him jovially. He grinned and drank slowly. The cool, smooth draft satisfied his thirst. It did more. It lifted him from the mud bank of mere existence to the tide mark of pleasant anticipation. That he anticipated nothing specific, made it all the more interesting. Another long one, and his spirit would be fairly afloat upon the wide harbor of imagination. It would not matter what his surroundings were—boozing ken, dark street, wide, blazing thoroughfare, or a dank bedroom in a loft. He would be dreaming, awake—outward bound, adventuring, unaware of the careless elbows of humanity, of faces—blearing, bright, or stolid—unaware of his own lean, graceless figure, his destitution and the hopelessnesss of his quest. Hope was a flighty, impertinent hussy, who had so often led Thimblerig a wild chase, which resulted in nothing but breathlessness, that he had decided to remain a lone bachelor of Fortune and save his breath.

With the third long one, Thimblerig entered the realm of the fourth dimension. He was above the obvious. Not that the saloon was a vale of enchantment and the bartender a demigod. The saloon was a second-rate drinking place, and the bartender a Hibernian, with a thick neck and heavy black eyebrows. Nor were the patrons fauns, although among them was the inevitable satyr. Thimblerig's surroundings were as plain to him as images in an untarnished mirror. Faces, voices, gestures and attitudes, he saw. Yet they meant nothing to him. He had withdrawn into himself. He was alone—neither elated nor depressed—simply alone and happy.

The journey from self-consciousness to sublime indifference had cost fifteen cents.

Indifferent he was to all that was going

on about him. But not indifferent to Thimblerig, his friend and comfortable companion. "Not on your bright future, sister! Not on your bright future!" Pretty soon Thimblerig would mooch out and do a slow glide down the avenue. And, around some corner off the avenue, there would be the dim entrance to a stairway, and above the entrance a triangular, illuminated sign reading: "Rooms: 25, 15 and 10 cents." An amateur paid his twenty-five and got a ten-cent room. A professional paid fifteen or ten and got the same kind of room.

Some one pushed a nickel into the slot of the player piano, which spewed out a jangling tune of the streets. Conversations became louder. The sound of the player piano finally ceased in a saccharine trickle of notes, ending in what might be justly termed the spinal chord. Thimblerig heard the tune, knew the tune, but felt nothing. The spurious melody awakened in him neither hate nor affection. Not even the breath of a memory answered. Had a regimental band entered the place and whanged and thundered, Thimblerig would have but stared at it nonchalantly. An ambulance gong might have stirred him, but that would have been different. Or a voice. Voices got under a fellow's hide, sometimes. Sometimes a voice could reach in and pull you off your perch and make you listen. Depended upon the quality of the voice. Some voices just rocked you to sleep. Other voices awakened the old, primitive lust for battle. And there were others which made you feel creepy inside and want to turn and run.

The man next to Thimblerig had set out to get drunk—blind drunk, if possible. He had arrived at the garrulous stage, and, his erstwhile companion having moved away, he turned to Thimblerig for audience. And he talked. He had a grudge against the city administration. He had been wronged. But the crooks in the city hall would hear something drop! He knew 'em, every unmentionable one of 'em. And he named a few, but the names he used, while possibly of biblical origin, were carelessly chosen. Thimblerig heard every word the plaintiff said, yet the words bounced off Thimblerig's consciousness, like pebbles off a drum. They made a sound and caromed into space. Yet he seemed to be listening. The man with a grudge called for a drink and invited Thimblerig to join him. Thimblerig came to, with a start. "No, thanks," he said. "I don't want to get drunk." And, in spite of the other's lowering face, he grinned. It was a friendly, an apologetic grin.

"You mean I'm drunk?" bellowed the man, with a grudge. Thimblerig showed fear. He tried to speak and grinned again. A fist crashed against his chin. He staggered and clutched at the rail of the bar. He saw the white-shirted arm of the bartender swing up and come down, saw the blackjack descending in a vicious arc, and heard a dull, soft sound. The bartender had heard Thimblerig's assailant, and the bartender had friends in the city hall. It was up to him to prevent a row in the saloon. He had done more than that. He had put a few extra pounds of personal animus into the blow. The man on the floor was dead.

"Call a cop!" "No, ring for the ambulance!" "Who hit him, anyway? Gee, but he went down quick! Did you see him smash the guy with the sporty overcoat?" "Sure! Poked him in the face. Well, he got what was comin' to him." "Did you see Jerry reach for him with a billy?" "No, you damn fool. It was the thin guy that done it. Wasn't it, Jerry? Jerry just reached over to pull 'em apart and make 'em quit. Ain't that right, Jerry?" "Sure! It was the thin guy with the light overcoat. Looked like a bad actor. That guy, over there. Hell! He was there a minute ago."

THIMBLERIG had vanished. Jerry called them all up and set out bottles and glasses. It was on the house. He took one himself. The wagon came, with burly, blue-clad men who weren't the least bit excited. Yet their eyes were alive. With a clang and a rush, the man with a grudge was hurried to the emergency hospital. He was dead, but it would look better for Jerry's place if he died in the wagon. Jerry had friends in the city hall.

Thimblerig didn't have friends in the city hall or anywhere else. And there had to be a goat. The central station telephoned the district police stations to gather in a guy about thirty or thirty-five years old, in a light-colored box coat with pearl buttons. A thin guy, about five feet six or seven. Light hair and blue eyes. Weighed about one hundred and thirty pounds. No marks of identification on hands and face. Wasn't lame or crippled.

Jerry had given a fairly accurate description of the scapegoat. He would be a fool not to hang it onto the bum, who was a stranger and didn't belong in the ward. But Jerry hadn't reckoned on the satyr, who was not a stranger and belonged in that ward. Unlike the bemused denizens of the saloon, the satyr had seen clearly every detail of the quarrel. He had no friends in the city hall. But his friends wanted to get into the city hall, being of the opposite party. He had influence enough to make it hot for Jerry, or make him come across with the "kale." He didn't care whether Jerry came across or traveled the other way.

And Thimblerig didn't know which way to travel after slipping out of the side door, when the man with a grudge went down in a motionless heap. Yet Thimblerig traveled at top speed. To the right, down the side street, and then to the left, down a street paralleling the avenue. Then again to the right down another side street, and again to the left. High brick walls and unlighted windows loomed on either side. Warehouses, wholesale houses. He slowed to a nervous walk. His chest hurt. He jumped, as he saw a faint, moving reflection of himself in a big window. But, no, he wasn't wearing a cap. He was afraid to look again. He kept on. The wide, dark mouth of the entrance to the building was just ahead, on his right. He thought he had better slip in there and get rid of that light overcoat. He would have to keep the derby until he could find some other kind of a hat. Wouldn't do to mooch around bareheaded. Thimblerig turned into the dark entrance. He imagined he saw something crouching far back among the shadows. His hands shook, as he tried to unbutton his overcoat. He knew there wasn't anything in there but shadows. He was feeling spooky, rattled, and no wonder! He slipped one arm out and paused. He had seen something move. He choked back a scream, as a light flashed in his face. His back grew cold. Well, they had got him!

"What's the big idea?" The voice came from behind the flash light.

"Why, I was just—why, nothin'. I just stepped in here to——"

The man behind the flash light stepped up close. "Well, I'm night watchman here, see? Just climb back into that coat and beat it."

"Sure! I didn't know anybody was here."

Thimblerig fumbled his arm into the sleeve. The flash light snapped off. He could scarcely see. Crimson disks, like fugitive suns, wheeled and vanished before his eyes. "Hold on a minute," said the night watchman. "Are you in a hurry?"

Thimblerig was, but he didn't want to say so. "You said to mooch along."

"That's all right. Listen: I got to meet a guy up to Jerry's. I won't be long. But I ain't supposed to leave here. Got to punch the clock. And the cop'll be bumpin' his stick along here in a couple of minutes. And he'll be tryin' the door and mebby stoppin' to chin, if I ain't inside. If he sees me inside, he'll give me the high sign and mooch along. Want to make a couple of bucks easy?"

Thimblerig wanted to get away. But he didn't know how even to start. A night watchman was something like a cop—had a badge and could pinch a guy for trespassin'.

"How do you mean?" Thimblerig asked.

"Easy! Just slip out of that benny and dicer and put on me cap and take me flash and me keys and step inside. You can be in sight without him seein' you too close. Work the flash once in a while, like you was on the job, punchin' the clock. He'll think everything's O. K. and won't be reportin' me as off the job. I'll be back here before he makes his second trip. Are you on?"

Thimblerig was about to decline, when he heard, far away the faint, shrill call of a policeman's whistle. "Come out of it!" said the night watchman. "Listen! I want to get a couple of drinks. I was kiddin' about meetin' a guy. Here's a couple of bucks, and here's me flash and the keys. Don't lose them keys. And, say, when you step inside, slip out of that benny. Here, take me cap and gimme that lid."

Reluctantly Thimblerig handed over his derby and took the night watchman's cap. "Get that coat off!" said the night watchman, "or you'll give me away." Thimblerig hesitated, then stripped off the overcoat. "You can wear it, if you like. I won't need it when I'm inside."

THE night watchman seemed a bit surprised. He laughed. "Great idea!" And he put on the coat. Stooping, he picked up something—something which Thimblerig thought looked like a small satchel. Perhaps he was going to get some bottled beer. From down the street came the click of footsteps. The night watchman turned and walked briskly away. Thimblerig, whose eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness of the entrance way, stepped to the door, tried it, and walked into the building. He flicked the flash light on and off. There was a partitioned hallway, and in the partition were round-topped windows, like bookkeepers' or cashiers' windows. The first floor was occupied by the office force. The main office faced the street. Thimblerig, fearing to be seen and fearing still more that, if not seen, the cop might step in and investigate, stole into the main office and shot his flash light at the wall. It centered on a round clock, which said eleven. He heard the deep tones of a bell tolling the hour. He turned and peered toward the street. Then, remembering that the night watchman had said the cop usually tried the door, he darted out to the hallway and released the catch of the spring lock, a second or two before a burly figure loomed up, and Thimblerig heard the door rattle. He backed away and turned into the main office. He could discern a blurred figure standing a few feet back from the front window. Thimblerig waved a greeting and, turning, shot the flash light on the clock. The figure waved reply and nodded. The gesture and the nod seemed to say: "Sure! Eleven and right on the dot."

It was a place of business, an office. It smelled like an office. Yet it was a ghostly environment, strange and filled with strange shadows. That shadow over there in the corner looked like a man standing and waiting. The flash light showed it to be a water cooler, a longish, round body on thin iron legs. Thimblerig wished that the watchman would return. Only five minutes past eleven. Thimblerig couldn't stand still, and he didn't want to sit down, although he was tired and shaky. So he prowled the length of the hall leading toward the back of the building. Occasionally he turned his flash light on that he might see where he was going and feel less afraid of the shadows. All the doors along the hall were closed—glass doors with gold lettering on them. There was one exception—the door farthest from the main office. This door stood open. Thimblerig turned his light on the floor of this room. He saw some scattered papers, a thin, canvas-covered book. But people didn't leave their letters and books scattered on the floor. He raised the flash light, and it shone on an open safe. Near the base of the safe he saw a man's shoe, the sole toward him. Slowly the golden disk of light crept on, up. Now it shone on the sprawled body of a man, his arm bent under him, his eyes half open and glassy. Horrified, Thimblerig could not cry out, nor move, nor scarcely breathe until he had perversely experienced the extreme horror. The little hole in the man's forehead looked like a tiny, black wafer, with a thread running from it. Before Thimblerig could turn and dash for the front door, he knew what had happened. And he knew who had killed the night watchman and taken his flash light and keys. Yes, a man as cool as that yegg had been, since he framed it to get away and leave an innocent man vainly waiting for him to return—yes that yegg would kill, and kill quick. And he was a tough one to dare to work it alone.

Thimblerig dropped the flash light and keys and ran down the hall to the door. Horror and dread had not dulled his senses, but had sharpened them. He turned the knob of the spring lock, closed the door softly, and stepped to the opening of the entrance way. No one in sight, up or down the street. Keeping close to the shadow of the wall, he slunk along to the first cross street, turned, and followed it toward the north. Somewhere down there was the river and dark places where a fellow could hide and kind of think things over. He didn't know what to do. But he did know that if the police got him he would be sent down, perhaps for murder. And he hadn't even touched the man who had hit him. He didn't fear the police so much as he feared humanity. He was a down-and-out, and down-and-outs always got it in the neck. Yes, the stray dog always got the can. Queer, how people would kick a stray dog just to see him run. And then the stray dog, battered and hungry and sore and scared to death, would slink into some hole and hide, and maybe wonder what he had done to make folks hate him.

THE streets weren't so well lighted in this district. Once in a while the window of a cheap store, run by one of them wops. Wops were always eating or buying something to eat, or scrapping about the price of the stuff. But they weren't so bad. They just left a fellow alone if he minded his own business. But Americans, now, they wouldn't let a fellow mind his own business. They were always starting something. Thimblerig tried to walk like an honest man, but he knew he looked guilty. But guilty of what? That was it! What had he done?

Down the block he saw the twin lights of a police station. He wanted to turn back. But to turn back meant to travel toward that street of grim brick walls and dark entrance ways. He would have to keep on, take a brace, and strut past the police station, just like anybody. He was within a few steps of the twin lights when he heard horses behind him, coming down the street at a brisk trot. The sharp clang of a gong sent shivers up and down his back. The wagon! And the people! Up from dim basement stairways, out of dark hallways, from swiftly opened doors came figures in shirt sleeves, in shawls, in hastily donned overcoats. Windows were thrust up and heads appeared.

Was the wagon fetching somebody who got somebody, or who had been done for? Was it the first act or the last act of the continuous performance? The horse swung to the curb. Thimblerig was in the midst of a silent group. Out of the wagon stepped a cop, then two more, with a handcuffed man between them. The man had on a derby hat and a short, light overcoat, with big pearl buttons. The cops yanked him along, across the sidewalk and up the steps. No one seemed to know what had happened. Some one in the group round Thimblerig asked one of the policemen, but he did not reply. Thimblerig knew what had happened. The yegg who had shot the night watchman had been caught. He had said he was going over to Jerry's place to get a drink. Of course he hadn't gone there. But he had gone in that direction, and the cops had been on the lookout for a light overcoat with big pearl buttons. Maybe they had arrested him for killing the man in the saloon. Maybe they didn't know about the night watchman.

"Wonder what he done?" said a voice at Thimblerig's elbow. The question was not addressed to Thimblerig. It was merely curiosity expressed in words. Then Thimblerig—the Thimblerig who often grinned so inopportunely and sometimes spoke in spite of himself—answered the question.

"He killed the night watchman at No. 221 Beaver Street and cracked the safe."

"Did, eh? Who is he?"

Thimblerig might have given some answer or other. He didn't have a chance. An officer told the driver of the wagon to wait a minute. Several policemen came from the station hurriedly. They clattered down the steps and climbed into the wagon. Thimblerig heard one of the officers say: "No. 221 Beaver—Sweeney's beat." As the group turned to watch the wagon, Thimblerig moved

on. He wondered how the police had learned of the murder and robbery so soon. He was pretty sure that the yegg hadn't told of it yet. There hadn't been time to give him the third. Thimblerig didn't know that when he had dropped the flash light in the back office, it had fallen so that its weight rested on the on-and-off button and threw a long ray of light across the floor of the hall. Sweeney, the patrolman, returning on his beat, had glanced toward the front office, half expecting to see the night watchman making his rounds. Instead, he had noticed a peculiar light along the floor of the hallway. He stood for a while looking through the front window. He knew that the safe was in the office from which the light came. There was something wrong. The light was shooting along the floor, too low to seem right. Sweeney drew his gun and tapped smartly on the window. If the wrong man was in there he'd show up, make a break for the open. But there was no response to his tapping. He tried the main door. It was locked. He shook the door. The watchman ought to hear that and show up. Finally, Sweeney hastened down to his box and rang up the station. He wasn't going to break into those offices just because there was a funny light on the floor. Let some one else do the breaking in and get the laugh if things were O. K.

The brick buildings gave way to grimy cottages, miles of them. The street was unlighted, save for the spluttering arc lights at the end of each block. Thimblerig could smell river mist. Pretty soon he would be far away enough from saloons and patrol wagons and cops to be safe, for a little while. He was hungry, thirsty and tired. Occasionally his knees wabbled. He would have to sit down and rest as soon as he came to the river. And he began to feel chilled. He hadn't noticed the cold before. The cottages were at last petering out. In their stead stood a row of two-story buildings, small groceries, a drug store, a hardware shop. Above the stores were what the landlords called apartments. At the end of the street, where the bridge rose in a low arc above the murky river, was a corner saloon. Thimblerig walked past it once and glanced in. A tough joint. He turned and came back.

THEN he took a brace and strutted his stuff—marched up to the bar and called for a schooner. The beer was not amber colored, but reddish brown, and it left a kind of sticky taste, and sweetish, but it was beer. And it pulled Thimblerig up a notch. He had a nickel left. Another long one would put him on his feet, and he could mooch along the river and maybe find a place to flop. Two men came in—river toughs, wearing sweaters and overalls and caps. They were neither young nor old. Their bodies had the vigor of youth, but their faces were weathered and seared and lined. They drank cheap whisky and talked together at the end of the bar. Thimblerig took the second long one and drank slowly. He felt better. In a little while he wouldn't feel the river chill, nor any weariness. Then he could walk and walk and talk to the Thimblerig that never failed him after the second long one. Maybe that other Thimblerig would tell him what to do. He would have to do something. He couldn't stick around town and run the chance of being picked up any minute. He put the heavy glass down on the bar, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and started for the door. Now he was all right. That which had so recently terrified him was fading away. He was going on a journey, and, as he traveled, he would visit with himself and perhaps find a bright road that would lead him to that vague place he had always wanted to find. As he opened the door, he could smell the river mist, but he didn't feel it. He was going on a journey.

"Jerusalem the Golden, with peace and plenty blest." He had heard that hymn, in a singsong joint. Maybe there was something to hymns, after all. "With peace and plenty blest." That would be a dandy place to live, where there was peace all the time. Just peace would be enough. Never mind the plenty. He would be willing to go without one meal a day, if he could have peace. He was getting tired of being kicked around and chased and scared. Well, guess he'd

start out. He buttoned up his thin coat and pulled down his cap.

"Just a minute, you!" The voice broke into his waking dream and shattered it to bits. He knew that tone, and there was something about the plain-clothes man that advertised him for what he was. He flipped back the lapel of his overcoat, displaying a badge.

"But I ain't done nothin'," said Thimblerig.

"That's all right. But you told a fella that lives near the station that somebody killed the night watchman at No. 221 Beaver Street, and you told him before the wagon got there, and we found it out. What you got to say?"

"Nothin'," said Thimblerig, and he thrust out his thin wrist. They had got him, at last. But he didn't care. They would torture him, give him the third, and maybe beat him up to make him say that he had killed a man. Or maybe they would try to hang both murders onto him. Queer—the handcuff didn't feel cold. It just felt warm and firm. And he wasn't afraid of the plain-clothes man. So long as he was handcuffed to the plain-clothes man, nobody else would get him. Not so you would notice! "Jerusalem the Golden, with peace and plenty blest." Maybe there was something in those hymns, if you happened to live in "Jerusalem the Golden." But if you were just a bum and didn't live anywhere——

"Full of hop," muttered the plain-clothes man. "But when the hop dies out, and he don't get any more, he'll talk."

Thimblerig heard, but he didn't care. He had given up hope. He was through. But not quite through. Deep in his heart he could still sing to himself, "Jerusalem the Golden." He would hang onto that, and they could kill him, but he would hang onto it. And not so long ago he had scorned singsongs and their hymns. But this wasn't their hymn. It was his. "Jerusalem the Golden" was his, and he would live there some day.

They had walked a block east and had taken a street car. It was a night car and traveled rapidly. When they got off the car they walked a block west, turned a corner, and there were the twin lights of the police station. But Thimblerig didn't care. Nothing mattered now. And they weren't going to bother him right away. They took his name, asked him a few questions, and led him to a cell. They thought that the ecstasy in his thin, shining face was the result of hop. He'd look different in the morning.

BUT when the gray morning came, and he was taken into a room with four others, and lined up in front of the captain and the plain-clothes man and an officer, Thimblerig's face was radiant, and occasionally he grinned. Then, a man stepped into the room from a side door. Thimblerig stared. It was the undertaker, the friend who had given him the box coat with the big pearl buttons, and the derby hat. Thimblerig didn't know that the man next to him in line was the yegg. In fact, Thimblerig paid no attention to his fellows. His gaze was fixed on the undertaker's fleshy, sallow face. The desk man came in and laid a light-colored, short overcoat and a derby hat on the desk. The captain turned to the undertaker.

"Mr. Smiley, you say you gave this coat and hat to a tramp, about six o'clock last night. You have identified the hat and coat. Now tell me if the man you gave them to is in this room."

Thimblerig was trying to hang onto "Jerusalem the Golden." He hummed it, way down in his heart, but it was hard work trying to remember the tune and the words. Mr. Smiley, suave, cool, quite at ease, stood with his hands in his trouser pockets looking at the five men lined up in front of the desk.

"Step down, and look 'em over," said the captain.

Mr. Smiley stepped down and walked along in front of the line. He had taken his right hand from his pocket, and, as he moved along, he toyed with a coin nonchalantly. He paused for a second in front of each man. When he came to Thimblerig he seemed to pause a little longer. In fact, he paused long enough for Thimblerig to notice that it wasn't a coin the undertaker was toying with,

but a brass check. Mr. Smiley moved to the next man, then stepped back to the desk. And, catching his eye, Thimblerig grinned, not consciously, but through habit. "The man I gave the hat and coat to isn't here," said Mr. Smiley. "I talked with him quite a while, and I would know him again, anywhere."

The succeeding silence was interrupted by the arrival of a brisk person, clothed smartly like a well-to-do business man. This person laid something on the desk, and his forefinger moved about, as the captain bent his head, listening. Finally the captain looked up.

"Got you this time, 'Rusty.' Got six or seven of your finger prints from the safe door. That lets the rest of you guys out," declared the captain.

The man next to Thimblerig licked his lips. A policeman stepped up to him and shoved him along toward the corridor of cells. The others in the line stood stupidly watching the captain. They were too scared to move until they were told to clear out. Thimblerig was the last to leave. And strangely enough, he didn't feel elated, now that he was free. He didn't care. He would just hunt up some kind of a job and get a stake and then beat it out of town. Go where? It didn't matter.

As he slouched along the street, a man passed him, walking swiftly. Thimblerig recognized him as Mr. Smiley, the undertaker. But why had Mr. Smiley stopped and laid something on the fire hydrant and then walked off, as though in a great hurry? Thimblerig wanted to speak to Mr. Smiley—to thank him. But that wouldn't do. Might get Mr. Smiley into trouble, if a cop should happen to see them. Thimblerig glanced at the fire hydrant, as he came opposite it. Mr. Smiley had laid a silver dollar on top of the hydrant. Thimblerig veered over and pocketed the dollar. Up the block the undertaker was just turning the corner, and, as he turned, he waved a white hand—a gesture that said: "So long! Good luck!" Mr. Smiley's gestures were always adequate. He had once been an unsuccessful tragedian.

Mr. Smiley had also had so much to do with both the living and the dead, that he knew a criminal when he saw one. And he knew that Thimblerig was not even a potential criminal; also, that Thimblerig was an easy mark when crooks happened to be hunting for goats.

THAT night Thimblerig walked into the rescue mission, the detested singsong. He had been shaved and had had his hair cut, and he sported a pair of shoes, secondhand, but new to him. When the time came for the actual hymn, and the horse-faced guy who led the "holy howlers" asked if there was any one present who wished to choose a hymn, Thimblerig spoke up promptly. "'Jerusalem the Golden!' And tell the guy at the melodeon to tromp on it!"

Thimblerig sang. He had a thin, clear voice, a natural ear for melody, and he loved tunes. But, heretofore, he had never paid much attention to the words of a song. He was startled when he discovered that the one hymn which he had made his own, did not read, "With peace and plenty blest," but read, "With milk and honey blest." Yes, the book said that. But he would not sing it that way. His Jerusalem was blessed with peace and plenty, and that settled it.

He tarried in the mission only long enough to gather unto himself an overcoat—a dark-colored overcoat, by choice, and some decent clothing and a small stake. These he accumulated by working at odd jobs—cleaning windows, distributing hand bills, even carrying in coal, a round basketful at a time, in places where the domestic topography precluded the use of a chute. After work Thimblerig never failed to stop in at a certain West Side saloon and get a long one—sometimes two. Then he went directly to the mission, as a paroled prisoner returns. He wasn't in love with the mission, but it was safe. Then spring came, and the urge to travel. Somewhere he would discover a golden land, blessed with peace and plenty. Once or twice he had thought of calling on Mr. Smiley, the undertaker. But Mr. Smiley read the newspapers, and the newspapers had told all about the row in Jerry's place, and how Jerry had been arrested, but had been let go because of insufficient evi-

dence. And the papers also printed a lot about Rusty, the yegg, his trial and his sentence to a life term in the pen. Mr. Smiley read the papers, and he would know that the guy he gave the overcoat to wasn't a crook. So Thimblerig didn't visit Mr. Smiley, although he often thought of him as a real guy who wouldn't kick a stray dog, even if he was asked to.

Finally, Thimblerig heard a still, small voice tell him to take up his bed and walk. He did so literally. He had graduated from bum to hobo. That was one step in the right direction. He took many thousand more, and all toward the West. His journey to California would make a story in itself—a three-thousand-mile story of hardships and dangers, of wind and sun and rain, of camp fires and chance companions, of one long and terrifying tramp across a barren land, where a guy traveled at night and tried to make it to a town or station along the railroad, where he could get some shade and water, and sleep in the daytime. Then came a day when Thimblerig looked down from the plateau of the desert upon a land literally flowing with milk and honey, to say nothing of almonds and oranges, only they don't flow. He loafed down the Cajon Pass and camped along the arroyo above San Bernardino. By degrees, pleasant degrees, he reached the coast, and stood upon a peak and discovered the Pacific, just as all tourists from the East do. It was great, but it wasn't just the spot he was looking for. So he rambled up the coast, crossed a range of hills, and sauntered down into a valley, and then he knew that he had arrived —that "Jerusalem the Golden" was a song come true.

"This is it! But how many know I been lookin' for this place, and how many care? It's kind of up to us"—Thimblerig spoke editorially—"to drop the couplin' pin into a link that is hooked onto one of these here farmers or fruit growers, or mebby a sheep-herder who owns a great flock in a weary land. That hoss-faced guy at the mission was always talkin' about tendin' sheep, and lyin' still by green pastures, and such. And that kind of a job ought to give a fella time to think. And he was always sayin', 'Think before you act.' But how many fellas ever set down on one of them sneakin' little cactus dinguses in the dark and did any thinkin' before they acted?" Thimblerig was talking to himself, and, in one pointed instance, from experience: "Not so many, sister! Not so many!

"There she is, flowin' with milk and honey and oranges and alfalfa and walnuts and grapefruit and some lemons. And here I am, lookin' down on her, same as Moses, only I got one foot in the door, and somebody's got to listen. Sign back there said, 'Oaji, three miles.' I never saw one. But, after tribulatin' three or four thousand miles to get here, I'm goin' to take a look."

IT is to whistle or sing, when the warm sun shines on the Oaji Valley, when one is footloose and feels as gay as a road runner catching grasshoppers in an alfalfa patch. However, if your lips are cracked and chapped from weary desert travel, it is just as well to hum. Thimblerig hummed, as he went. A long one would go pretty good. Yet there was a glory in the morning that lifted him above mere physical thirst. His eye was alert for a green pasture and still waters. He found the next best thing, an irrigating ditch. This was before the advent of carbon monoxide. And beside the irrigating ditch, in the shade of a fatherly cottonwood, he uncorded his blankets, washed, shaved, took a semicircle of aluminum comb from his inner hatband, and combed his scanty hair. He even went so far as to rub the dust from his shoes with a wad of newspaper. He drank of the cool, clear water. A rancher came along the road on foot, a shovel over his shoulder. "Say, mister," called Thimblerig, "what place is this?"

"O-hi."

Thimblerig seemed puzzled. "I mean —right here."

"O-hi."

Evidently the rancher was smart-cracking. He didn't seem any too friendly, though. Thimblerig grinned. "Thanks. But, honest, how high is O-hi?"

"Think you're funny, don't you?"

"Sure! Don't you?"

"I think a hobo is about as low as a man can get," replied the rancher.

"Nope, my friend. There's something lower than that—and that's a man with a job tryin' to throw dirt on a man that is lookin' for one."

"You lookin' for work, honest?"

"Yep. Honest work."

"Well, I can give you a job."

Thimblerig's thin face glowed with anticipation. He regretted having lost his temper. But the rancher had started the kidding.

"Well, I'll be awful glad to get work," said Thimblerig. "I like this place."

"All right. Take this shovel and bury yourself."

Thimblerig's mouth twitched, and his face grew white. But no angel with a flaming sword or lopsided old shovel was going to chase him out of The Promised Land. Swinging his bed roll across his back, Thimblerig strutted haughtily down the road, nobly conscious of having refrained from retorting with a play upon words regarding interments which has became a classic among hobos and others. No, not The Promised Land, but The Garden of Eden, was what he had meant. But he was hot and kind of forgot his lines.

The dairy farm was as immaculate and neat and sanitary as an operating room in a hospital—that is, before the battle. There were very few discontented cows in the great, glossy-backed herd. In fact, they were the most contented cows in the world. Just to see them in the stanchions, lazily rolling their cuds from side to side, as they chewed thoughtfully, convinced one that the billboards sometimes told the truth. They were thoroughly contented and gave calm milk—several grades of it, all from the same cow. But that didn't happen until the milk had been manhandled at the distributing plant. And that is what puzzled Thimblerig when he hired out as a dairymaid. He had had visions of pails of foaming milk and pans from which the rancher's wife skimmed the cream and served some of it to the help, with their coffee and flapjacks.

Thimblerig was puzzled. True, he saw cows and calves. But he scarcely ever saw any milk. You see, it was like this. When the cows were in the stanchions, fellas in striped overalls went along puttin' things like football masks on the udders of the cows. The masks had a lot of funny little rubber tubes that came together in one long hose. And then a guy turned on the electricity, and them there dinguses went to work and milked the cows, just like humans. It was disillusioning. It wasn't a bit pastoral. And once a cow doctor came along and gave all the cows a shot in the arm, but maybe that was to keep them contented.

Thimblerig didn't know. His job was to drive a team, pulling a wagon laden with filled milk cans to the station. It was impressed upon him that he must never miss the train. And he was faithful to his trust. He wore a striped-denim uniform, with white letters across the back of the jacket. He was somebody. The trainmen chaffed him and called him "Joe." He liked that. Sounded like they thought he was a real guy.

Meals were served in a clean, airy, pleasant dining room—good meals, with plenty of vegetables. The sleeping quarters were also clean and orderly. And there were shower baths and even a plunge. The men were paid promptly, the first of each month. Rowdyism was discouraged, and profanity was not tolerated beyond a reasonable working limit. Smoking was not allowed in any of the buildings except the reading room. The dairy was organized efficiency, from its northern boundary to the south line. Thimblerig worked faithfully, and thought he also was contented. Yet, somehow, there was something lacking.

ABOUT the time the wild oats were heading, and poppies bloomed in the remote, uncultivated valleys, the something which Thimblerig had missed, appeared. First, a cloud of dust—a sign and a portent. Out of the cloud emerged a band of sheep, with dogs trailing on either wing of the band; following the sheep, came a pack burro. Behind the pack burro strode a lean, little, dried-up Mexican, with a stick in his hand. Thim-

blerig gazed upon an ideal. He was a bit disappointed in the stick. It wasn't what sacred literature had described as a shepherd's crook. The Mexican used it to punch the slow end of the pack burro. The Mexican was old—very old, señor! *Muy viejo.* But every year, after the rains, he went up into the hills with his sheep. One got into the way of it, after thirty or forty years.

Thimblerig, driving to the station in the afternoon to get some empties, had pulled his team to one side to let the sheep pass. The band surged against the opposite fence and slowly strung out, as the dogs dodged here and there, knowing their work and doing it with zest. The old sheepman paused to thank Thimman's third, *"Gracias, señor!"* Thimblerig actually blushed. That was all right! Glad to do it. After the old man's third, *"Gracias, señor!"* Thimblerig thought it was about time to introduce himself. You never could tell. The old man might give him a job some day. "My name's Joe. Work up at the dairy. Do you handle all them sheep alone?"

"Alone, me? *Si!* An' the dog, he work pretty good."

"Well, so long. I always did like sheep."

The old Mexican punched his pack burro and followed the cloud of dust. Thimblerig automatically kept an eye on his own driving, but his mind was submerged in dusty clouds of thought. To ramble along in the sunshine with that old gentleman—Grassy Señor, he said his name was—would be just about the last word. And to camp where there were trees and water and grass—sit by a fire, at night, and smoke and chin about everything! And one good thing, sheep wouldn't hook you or kick or bite you, like a cow or a horse would, sometimes. And it would be educational, learnin' to talk Spanish.

Thimblerig collected the empties and drove back to the dairy. The following day he told his foreman he thought he would quit, the first of the month. Thimblerig almost wept with gratitude when the foreman told him he would have some kind of a job for him whenever he wanted to come back.

Thimblerig drew part of his pay and had the balance credited to him on the company books. A job and money when he came back! "Jerusalem the Golden, with peace and plenty blest." The sheepman had been on his way four days. That was nothing. It wouldn't be hard to trail him, for he would have to travel slowly. Two days after setting out, Thimblerig overtook the sheep, in evening camp, along the foothills. The dogs ran out from the fire, snarling. They returned frolicking around Thimblerig, as though they had expected him and were giving him a welcome.

The old man noticed this. His dogs, they knew! And old José's little black eyes, like sparks of fire on leather, burned shrewdly upon the visitor. Why had he come? What did he want? But let the visitor speak. There was all the time in the world. And, after some goat's meat and frijoles and black coffee, Thimblerig spoke—and spoke with "the tongues of men and of angels."

Old José listened and gathered from Thimblerig's outburst that he wanted to help him with the sheep. As for pay, that didn't matter. The queer gringo wanted to learn all about sheep. *Por Dios!* But there was nothing to learn. Sheep were sheep. Fortunately, just about then Thimblerig coughed. The frijoles had been pretty hot—seasoned beyond a mere gringo's powers of appreciation. Old José's eyes brightened. He nodded. Now he understood. The queer one was sick in the chest. He wished to live outdoors and grow strong.

"You got the sick in the chest?" queried old José.

Thimblerig had never felt better in his life. But something told him not to say no. "I got a cough," he said, as a sort of compromise.

"You cook?" And José gestured toward the Dutch oven.

"You bet your life! Nothin' fancy, but I can shake a mean skillet."

"Bueno. You stay here." And that was all.

Thimblerig stayed—stayed until fall drove the sheep from the higher country into the lowlands, through which they drifted lazily toward the valley and home.

And when they arrived at old José's home, Thimblerig discovered that the old man lived alone, without kin of any kind. He had homesteaded a few acres, built an adobe, and had grown alfalfa, a few vegetables, and enjoyed the fruit from trees he had planted many years ago—figs and olives and apricots. José was getting feeble, and Thimblerig did most of the work that winter. Toward spring, old José was taken sick one night, and he died before Thimblerig could get a doctor.

They had been friends, the best kind of friends, because neither talked much. A word or a gesture from either, and the other understood. Thimblerig drew his money from the dairy and paid for the old man's funeral. Then one day, as he sat in the adobe, smoking and wondering what would become of José's place and the sheep, a man in a broad, black Stetson and rather severe black clothing, drove up in a light buggy and talked with Thimblerig. It developed, much to Thimblerig's surprise, that old José had left his place, his sheep, and something less than two hundred dollars to his friend and partner in business, Joe Smiley. But there was a hitch. How could Thimblerig prove that he was the man mentioned in the will?

"Ask the folks at the dairy," said Thimblerig.

"Oh, that's different," said the county official. "I didn't know but what you were some hobo that just happened to come along and roost here."

"Well, I might have been, at that," said Thimblerig. "But you ask the foreman at the dairy how Joe Smiley stands with him."

"That's all right," declared the official. "You better come to town when you get time. There's some papers to sign."

The official departed. Thimblerig went into the adobe and sat on the edge of the bed. His eyes filled with tears. The two dogs lay on the floor, their muzzles on their paws, watching him. Thimblerig clasped his knee, and rocked back and forth gently. He was humming, "Jerusalem the Golden." There were some regular guys in the world, after all. Mr. Smiley, the undertaker, and old José, the Mexican sheepman. Sometimes one of them hymns did come true, but you wanted to be sure and pick the right hymn, at the start. And a fella just had to tie to something, or he'd get dizzy and fall off the edge, or get tromped in the rush, or busted in the jaw, or somethin'. Thimblerig brushed his hand across his face. He grinned. The dogs thumped the floor with their tails.

"You been waitin' for the old man, but he ain't comin' back," said Thimblerig. "I'm the boss now. You'll have to kind of get used to me. And, listen! Pretty soon we'll be moochin' up the valley with the sheep again. His name was José, which means Joe. And I'm Joe." Thimblerig tapped his chest with his thumb. "Joe, savvy?"

Thimblerig raised his eyes and stared at the wall. He seemed to see a little, dried-up figure in overalls and coarse boots and a sombrero, the figure of old José. And Thimblerig heard a voice:

"Gracias, señor! I know you be good to my dogs and my sheep. So it is that I give them to you."

The figure melted into the wall. And Thimblerig was staring at the old man's faded black coat and hat, on the peg where he had last hung them.

SEASONED LOGIC

THE persistent, but nervous young man whose suit with a charming young girl seemed to lag, demanded of her young brother:

"Is your sister in?"

"No," was the prompt reply. "She's just gone out."

The lover sighed and exclaimed:

"I feel like the man who went to the cage and found the bird flown."

"Oh, no, you're not," declared the hard-hearted youngster. "You're like the month of June. Every time you come in, May goes out."

By

FRED MACISAAC

Author of "The Girl of Rio," "Tin Hats," Etc.

Marching

THE STORY

In 1866, just after the close of the Civil War, the Indian situation was very difficult, for the government had made treaties apportioning certain territories to them. The discovery of gold in those lands brought a rush of gold seekers—and the redskins rebelled. The Indians, under the leadership of Chief Red Cloud, had assembled an army of fifteen thousand, and against this formidable foe were sent battalions of exceedingly poor soldiers, composed, for the most part, of conscripts and disgruntled men from the East, whose minds were full of stories of savage atrocities. Not only this, but these soldiers had expected to be demobilized without further action, and they detested their new job.

Commanding one of these battalions was the gallant young Lieutenant Casper Molton. Of his command, he was the only well-disciplined man, and his appearance drew the approval of General Philip Stone, who was in command of all the Western activities. Stone called Casper before him shortly after the arrival, and assigned him to the difficult task of delivering his men into the hands of Major Walter Foster, at Fort Appleby. The way led through one of the most hostile sections, and Casper's logical reward for the exploit would be a captaincy. The young soldier accepted the task gratefully and started out, accompanied by an old frontiersman, Buffalo Charlie, as his counselor.

Arriving at Julesburg, one of the most thriving, and apparently one of the most disreputable towns of the old West, Casper happened to see a lovely young lady who was watching the arrival of the battalion. Their eyes met with that electric thrill which is indicative of the beginning of love. But the girl vanished into the crowd, and Casper was unable to locate her later, when his time was free.

This young woman was a Southerner who had been bound, with her father, Major Lattimer, into the West because of the poverty and humiliation they had suffered after the war. Her name was Lucy. Just before she witnessed the arrival of Casper's command, she had suffered a great loss in the death of her father, who had been shot in a fight over a card game. Her pride had made her spurn the charity of the town, and she was now about to continue her journey Westward, accompanied only by her colored servant, Anthony.

Lieutenant Molton, despairing of ever seeing the girl again, led his command, the next morning, on toward Fort Appleby. His first stop was at Fort Sedgwick, where he met Major Foster, the rather delinquent commandant of Fort Appleby. Foster insisted on taking command of Casper's men, claiming that the lieutenant's assignment ended when he had delivered the men into Foster's hands. Casper contended this for a time, citing the explicit orders of his higher authority, General Stone; but his discretion at last made him obey the major. There was no other course open to him, even though he greatly feared that Foster, whose experience in the Indian country did not amount to much, would make some blunder that would provoke an encounter with the redskins.

Deep into the most hostile section of the post Civil War Indian territory, pushed Lieutenant Casper Molton, commanding a battalion of unruly soldiers. His hard task was made less unpleasant, however, by his growing love for Miss Lucy Lattimer, a Southern girl who was headed in the same direction.

Men

In Four Parts
Part II : : :

CHAPTER X.

WHEN CLEANLINESS IS A VICE.

THEY camped that night about eighteen miles from Sedgwick. Casper formed his wagons into a circle, set up his tents within the inclosed space, and hobbled his animals. He posted sentries, being careful to alternate the galvanized guards with loyal sentries. If the ex-Confederates planned to cut and run, they would try it now, rather than wait until they were far into dangerous country. They had left the South Platte River at Sedgwick and would not reach the North Platte for a couple of days more, so he was careful that there was no waste of fresh water. Therefore, he fumed when Foster's striker demanded that the tin bathtub be filled for his master.

Compressing his lips tightly, Casper strode to the major's tent and asked permission to enter. He found the officer in undershirt and drawers, lying on his cot, awaiting his bath.

"I beg your pardon, major," he said. "I have taken the liberty of refusing your striker permission to fill your bathtub. Not anticipating that you would require a bath, we did not bring more than enough fresh water for the men and animals to drink."

"Damn careless of you, Lieutenant Molton," said Foster sharply. "And suppose you were delayed in reaching the North Platte—suppose you were penned in by Indians for a few days, what would happen then?"

"We carry enough for such an emergency, sir."

"But not enough to enable your commanding officer to keep himself clean. Fill the tub from the reserve barrels."

"If you insist, sir. But I do wish to register my protest."

"Well, when do we reach the North Platte?"

"In a couple of days, sir."

"All right. I like to be clean, lieutenant. I dislike to sleep in my clothes, and I hate to go without a bath. It's a prejudice of mine which you probably cannot understand. I will forgo my bath until we reach the North Platte, but from that time on I do not wish to hear any such protests as you have just made. See to it that we transport sufficient water for sanitary purposes in the future."

"Yes, sir," said Casper, who flushed with anger at the insult conveyed in the major's acquiescence. "Your bath requires water enough to fill a hundred canteens."

"I don't give a damn if it would fill a thousand. I can stand hardships as well as any soldier, when they are necessary, but we are proceeding peacefully over a traveled country, and there is no reason in the world why we shouldn't carry sufficient supplies. That's all."

Saluting, Casper left the tent, thankful he had suppressed the angry retort which had burned his lips. He found the striker still arguing with the quartermaster sergeant whose delight, when the servant departed with the empty bathtub, was vociferous, and Molton turned away that he might not be compelled to rebuke the old noncom for his lack of respect for those who bathed on the trail.

The importance of cleanliness from the standpoint of health was not understood in Civil War days, nor in those years that followed, and army officers had not learned to require that their men be clean for the sake of general health. The habits of germs were unknown, the cause of infection and gangrene a mystery, and in the West, where water was scarce, it was considered a great waste to use it for bathing, except for washing the face and hands. Many of the soldiers had bathed in the South Platte a day or two ago, more for personal enjoyment than for sanitary reasons, and some of them had taken advantage of the opportunity to wash their clothes.

Buffalo Charlie was hale and hearty, though he had obviously not washed for years, if ever. He hated water like a cat, had never learned to swim, and if he fell into a creek or a river, he permitted his clothes to dry on his person.

Casper Molton liked to be clean and bathed when he got the chance, but the necessity of going for days, and even weeks, without removing his clothing, did not distress him. He had learned fortitude in the war.

Had our medical corps in the Civil War understood the theory of sterileness, it is probable that thousands who died of their wounds would have been saved. Though the doctors then realized that a wound must be kept clean, they did not know that a hasty washing of the hands was unlikely to remove the chances of infection, and many a surgeon operated with hands teeming with disease germs, to the end that the patient died in agony.

And, of course, Major Foster was as ignorant as the rest of the necessity of bathing. Happening to be a fastidious person, he bathed for the joy of it. However, his thoughtlessness in wishing to bathe in the scanty supply of drinking water, had the result of making him immediately unpopular with the command. The quartermaster sergeant babbled, and the daintiness of the major came in for rude comment. From that time on he was referred to behind his back as "Madam" Foster.

NEXT morning Major Foster picked four horses from the spares, set Lieutenant Jones to making inquiries among the enlisted men as to who could ride, and finally selected four galvanized soldiers and two from the other company. This gave him, with his orderly, a force of seven mounted men to accompany him on his excursions.

Although Casper objected strongly against wearing out the spare animals, he did not consider it proper to register his protest after the bathtub experience of the previous night. In case of Indian attack, it was certain that some of the horses and mules attached to the wagons would be killed, and they were sure to need every animal they possessed before reaching Appleby; nevertheless, he had to submit to this imposition.

Foster apparently proposed to amuse himself exactly as he chose during the journey, depending upon Molton to conduct the expedition. He was ready to take credit for its safe conduct, or throw upon Casper's shoulders the blame of disaster. It was safe enough at present for the major to wander off with his improvised cavalry, for the country was so flat that mounted hostiles could be seen for a long distance. Soon they would enter a rolling country, filled with ravines and gulches and cut by streams, with thickly wooded banks—all ideal lo-

cations for Indian ambuscades and extremely risky for a small party to traverse. If it had not been for the men with him, Casper would not have wasted too much time in regret for fear the major might be cut off. In the end, it might be the salvation of the expedition.

The improvised cavalry came in for a lot of chaff from the infantry. Curiously enough, foot soldiers despise cavalry as horsemen have contempt for infantry. True, the cavalryman rides comfortably, while the footman raises blisters on his feet, but when the march is over and the footman has no cares, the horseman must attend to his mount, feed him, water him, curry him, and guard him.

There was little fraternizing between the two elements in the command, for the regular troops, who were Casper's main dependence, were outspoken in their contempt for the Southerners, not because they were "Johnny Rebs," but because they had turned their coats; while the galvanized ones resented the attitude of the "damned Yanks," and only asked an opportunity to show them that they were not contemptible.

Casper and Jones discussed creating a spirit of emulation between the two aggregations, but Jones who commanded the Johnnies was not hopeful.

"They're just mean," he said. "Some of them would knife a man in a minute, and our boys are not that kind. I'm keeping a close watch on them. Of course, it is unfair to keep them in the army, now that the war is over, but some of our outfits haven't fared any better. Take that company you arrived with at Kearney."

Casper laughed. "They were ready to mutiny, too," he admitted. "I'm glad that the men we have are regulars. I wouldn't have put it by my volunteers to join the Johnnies and desert in a body."

Several days passed without incident, though Major Foster grumbled at the slow progress of the infantry, and on the morning of the third day they arrived in sight of the North Platte, alongside of which the trail continued for some distance. Occasionally a solitary horseman passed them, one of whom told the story of the destruction of a wagon train near Fort Phil Kearney—not to be confused with Fort Kearney—a small post several hundred miles up the Bozeman Trail. A dozen men had been killed and scalped, and half a dozen women and children dragged off by the savages.

CASPER, without being aware of it, was following Lucy Lattimer's wagon, but each day was falling farther behind. The single wagon was making about thirty miles a day, while the military expedition averaged only fifteen, and, at the river, there was a halt of several hours to permit the men to bathe and wash their clothes. At the river they encountered their first Indians, four horsemen who did not wear war paint, but came boldly into camp, with their hands lifted in the ancient signal of peaceful intentions. Buffalo Charlie said they were Arapahoes, undoubtedly members of a hostile band who had come to spy and ought to be killed out of hand. As he spoke their language, he acted as interpreter for Casper and Major Foster.

In reply to questions, the Indians said that they were members of the band of Chief White Mule, who had sent back the war messages of Red Cloud with a refusal, and who sought to be friends with the white man. Their visit was to beg a little tobacco and bacon and to assure the soldiers of their good wishes. While they talked, their black eyes roved, which caused Casper to think they were counting the number of his soldiers and wagon. There was nothing to be done, for he could not be burdened with prisoners, and his orders were to treat all redskins as friends, unless they displayed hostile intentions. Although they carried only bows and arrows, they impudently asked for cartridges for the chief, a request which was bluntly refused. However, Casper made up a small package of tobacco, gave them a side of bacon, and sent them on their way.

Charlie looked after them longingly, his fingers twitching on the hilt of his knife.

"I suppose you'd like their scalps, Charlie," said Jones, with a laugh.

"They'd like mine," he retorted. "Proper thing to do would be to shoot them down before they get out of range. It's hell to be civilized."

Casper followed their departing figures with less sanguinary thoughts. There was much to admire in the American Indian, cruel and brutal as he undoubtedly was; for, of all savages, he was the most intelligent and progressive. These rode their ponies as if they were part of them—rode without saddle or bridle, yet horsemanship was a comparatively recent accomplishment for them. Before the dawn of history, a tiny animal bearing a strong resemblance to the horse had lived in North America, but had vanished ages ago, and it was not until Cortez and his conquistadors invaded Mexico that the horse was introduced to this continent. The savages had revolutionized their existence and become cavalrymen. They had made war with bows and arrows until the white men appeared with guns, powder, and bullets, whereupon they had learned to use the Caucasian's weapons, and many of them had become wonderful marksmen.

Originally they had been hospitable and kind to strangers, until the bad faith of the whites had caused them to retaliate in kind, and they had more respect for treaties duly solemnized than ourselves. Nearly every Indian war had been provoked by white aggressions or outrages, and the present outbreak was chargeable to the lack of respect of the frontiersmen for the pledge made by the American government that the lands of the Indians in the Northwest should not be invaded. If the savage believed that war should be waged terribly, had not General Sherman declared that war was hell, when he ravaged Georgia, inhabited by his own kind of people? The torture of captives was abominable, but the Indian code was that a brave should fight to the death, and torture was proper punishment for yielding.

Given a square deal, something could have been made of the American Indian; his nomadic habits might have been changed, since he had demonstrated his adaptability by his mastery of the horse and the gun.

Casper looked at Buffalo Charlie with momentary distaste; the man was a white savage, as relentless, as brutal, as ferocious as any redskin; he was a representative of the tribe of nomadic whites who pushed into the Indian lands, regardless of their rights; who stole their horses, killed their cattle, and slaughtered the natives in cold blood, without a tinge of remorse. Given the slightest encouragement, Charlie would have shot those Indians in the back and taken their scalps, although they were departing confident of the magnaminity of the white soldiers.

Common sense told him that Charlie might be quite right in wishing to eliminate spies; perhaps such a deed might be the salvation of the command; but civilized men do not do things in that barbarous way.

He shrugged and went to his tent. After all, his business was to fight Indians, whether they had any right on their side or not, just as he had fought the Confederacy because it was engaged in war with his people. A soldier obeyed orders and asked no questions.

Major Foster was questioning Charlie.

"You think they were spies?"

"Sartain," replied the scout.

"Then from now on we will be watched."

"We been watched right along, from the minute we left Sedgwick."

"But we saw no Indians."

"You never see Injuns, 'less they want you to."

"Do you think we are in danger of attack?"

"Not now; we're too strong a force to tackle in the open. They'll wait till they collect a big party and lay for us in some valley, away up the trail."

"We'll have no trouble beating them off," said the major rather nervously.

The scout grinned a toothless grin.

"What's a little trouble when it comes to saving our scalps?" he retorted.

"I mean that no force the Indians could collect would be strong enough to wipe out two hundred disciplined soldiers."

" 'Pends on who commands the sodjers," said Charlie, almost insolently.

"Them galvanized bucks ain't so darn well disciplined."

"It's up to you to keep us out of ambuscades," retorted the major, drawing himself up, whereupon Charlie gave the slovenly salute of the civilian employee of the army.

"Don't you worry, sir. I like my hair long," he declared.

CHAPTER XI.

HORSE CREEK.

IT has been obvious to an experienced reader of fiction that Casper Molton must overtake Lucy Lattimer, or there wouldn't be any story; and it would appear that the author has used poor judgment in sending the girl forward in a mule wagon, while the lieutenant followed with infantry—the hare and tortoise all over again, except that it was quite unlikely that the girl would curl up and go to sleep by the wayside.

The mules driven by the eager Anthony had made excellent time, day after day, and passed several wagon trains drawn by oxen, whose pace was even slower than Casper's column; while the journey was so uneventful that Anthony's wool no longer crawled upon his scalp at the thought of hostiles. Not a sign of Indians did they see; everything was peaceful and serene; by the roadside wild flowers grew in profusion; the days were warm, but the breeze was balmy, and most of the time they were in sight of the placid North Platte River.

Gradually Lucy dispensed with her own secret terrors, for in this pacific plain, stretching to the horizon, like an ocean unstirred by wild winds, it did not seem possible that murder might be lurking. Once they met a band of soldiers, whose officer insisted upon stopping the wagon and asking her destination. He told her they had come from Fort Laramie, a hundred miles farther up the trail; that his men were soldiers whose enlistment was up, and who were going down to Fort Kearney to be mustered out. They had seen no Indians nor evidences of Indian outrage, but he strongly opposed her continuing on her journey and suggested turning around.

Lucy did not tell him why she could not go back. She laughed, shook her head, and told Anthony to drive on. The officer had been respectful and admiring, but she didn't like his uniform.

It was a stream called Horse Creek, although its name was unknown to her, which stopped her progress. This river was wide and deep and running swiftly, nor could they discover a ford, although they moved along its bank for several miles. They camped some five miles off the trail that night, each watching four hours; they continued a couple of miles farther up the river bank, then turned in despair and moved back toward the natural road. Lucy knew that the stream must flow into the Platte several miles on the other side of the trail, and the Platte was impassable.

Judge of their distress when they topped a rise and saw a train of six wagons moving away from the opposite side of the river. During their detour, this outfit had reached the stream and crossed in a manner beyond the comprehension of the girl and the negro, and they would be too far away to observe them, by the time they got back to the road.

In an hour they reached the place where the wagon train had crossed, as they could tell by the tracks of the broad wheels leading down the river, which convinced Lucy that there must be a ford at that spot.

Many of these Western streams, although wide, were very shallow, being no more than three feet deep in the center, drying up entirely during the late summer and fall, and even deep rivers had shallow places where sand or mud bars had formed; but it looked to Lucy as if Horse Creek was deep at the spot where the wagons had recently made the passage.

Anthony undertook to test the ford; he waded out, was soon up to his waist, suddenly disappeared, came up sputtering, and swam to the shore.

"Dem wagons must be golden chariots with wings, if they ever crossed this ribber," he declared, squeezing the water out of his coat tails and regarding his soaking pantaloons ruefully.

"But we know they crossed here. See the wheel tracks!"

"Yasum, but that ole ribber is fifty feet deep right here, and I went down the whole ways."

"Then there is nothing to do but wait for some wagons to come along and show us how to make the passage," she said ruefully. "Unhitch the mules, Anthony, and let's settle down."

"Might have to wait a week," he protested. "S'pose Injuns catch us?"

"I don't think we are in more danger here than anywhere along the trail. We are in the hands of Heaven."

"Yasum. 'Spec' a lot of good Christian people come this way, and Injuns got most of um."

"We have no choice," she said sharply.

All day they waited. The white cover of the wagon was as conspicuous on that plain as the sail of a ship on the ocean. Lucy, although she had sensibly stated that they were in no more peril camping by the river than moving slowly across the landscape, suffered more by inaction than during a period of progress, for the sense of motion was some satisfaction. Although they might be moving steadily toward danger, there was a satisfying sense of escaping from it by rolling along ever so slowly.

THE past week had been harrowing for the young girl, who was intelligent enough to understand fully the risk she was running, though she did not hesitate to take it. It was not so bad during the daytime, when her eyes could assure her that there were no redskins in sight, and at night, seated beside the camp fire, darkness seemed a protection, although the fire glowed red and could be seen for miles. But when the negro was curled up in his blanket, and Lucy sat, tense, with her breechloader lying across her lap, then her imagination held full sway, and every puff of wind startled her; the stamping of a mule drew her to her feet; she imagined savage hands grasping the back of her neck, and the darkness menaced.

The country was not still at night; there were occasional wolves howling in the distance; coyotes barked; night-flying birds screamed or flapped their big wings, as they passed over the fire, toward which curiosity had drawn them. A score of times every night she was upon the point of waking Anthony, and restrained herself by the sternest kind of self-control. The negro must drive all day, therefore he must rest. When she in turn lay down to sleep, she experienced frightful dreams and often woke with a start, to see the black man outlined beyond the dying brush fire, awake and alert.

The long day of waiting by the river very nearly finished her nerve, and during the night she was ready to shriek at the slightest sound.

Morning came at last, and they ate their breakfast of flapjacks and bacon silently and distressfully. Daylight showed nothing to cheer them; the trail behind and ahead was scant, and so it remained for several hours. About eleven o'clock Anthony gave a shout and pointed backward. Miles and miles away, outlined against the horizon, was a group of black specks, and a few minutes later they could discern tiny white spots, which were nothing but the tops of a train of prairie schooners.

Anthony's spirits began to rise, and he burst forth in song, choosing appropriately the old hymn, "One More Ribber to Cross."

The girl climbed upon the seat of the wagon to watch, and in time she discerned a long column of marching men and rolling wagons.

"It's soldiers," she exclaimed. "We can't travel with soldiers."

"Missy," declared Anthony, "de war am ober. Soldiers has guns, and Injuns is afraid of dem. Course, I prefers sodgers in gray, but blue is goin' to look good to dis darky."

Lucy said nothing; secretly she was willing to suppress her prejudices if the boys in blue would help her across the river; and their numbers gave her courage after her terrors of the night.

In the course of half an hour she could distinguish a little group of horsemen, followed by a line of infanry, and then a long train of wagons. While this force was in sight, it was certain that no In-

dian would show his nose. For the first time since leaving Julesburg she felt safe.

Presently across the plain came the distant rumble of a drum, the sound of which caused Anthony to perform a shuffling dance which, half a century later, would be the foundation of a new school of dancing, indulged in enthusiastically by all civilized peoples.

"Babylon is fallen! Babylon is fallen!
And we's come to occupy the lan'."

The old fellow forgot that he was a loyal negro and had no business singing the negro chant of freedom.

"Anthony!" exclaimed Lucy with sharpness.

" 'Scuse me, Miss Lucy. I's so glad I don' know what I's singing," he apologized.

The girl was too much interested in the approaching escort to take him further to task, particularly as several horsemen had detached themselves from the column and were approaching rapidly.

A short distance away the riders checked their horses and approached cautiously, as anything unusual in that country required discreet inspection, and a single covered wagon at midday, with its animals unharnessed and grazing, was unusual.

AND then the horsemen galloped up and swung around before the wagon, where Casper Molton, to his astonishment, looked on the face of the girl he had seen for a moment that night at Julesburg. Recognition was instant with Lucy, also; but, though her heart beat with accelerated motion, her face was unsmiling.

"Madam!" exclaimed the officer, sweeping his hat from his head and bowing almost to his horse's ear.

"Sir!" replied Lucy blandly.

"May we be of service?" he asked eagerly.

"It is possible," she said, still without a smile. "I wish to cross the river."

For the first time Casper looked at the torrent. His eyes widened.

"It's certainly swollen," he declared. "But, of course, we shall be delighted to assist you. May I ask whither you are bound?"

"To Virginia City, sir."

"But surely—— Where is your wagon train—your escorts?"

"I am traveling alone, except for my servant."

"But this is mad."

"I am in no need of your opinion, Mister Officer. Will you aid me to cross the river?"

"Surely—of course. I beg your pardon, but didn't I see you in Julesburg?"

"I really do not know," she replied indifferently, although she felt a thrill, as she realized that he had noticed her and remembered.

"We left the next morning. I do not see how you can be here ahead of us."

"Please have done with questions and aid me to cross the river."

"Certainly, miss. It's going to be a job. There seems to be no ford."

"It may be difficult for soldiers," she said scornfully from her perch on the wagon seat. "However, a train of simple emigrants crossed yesterday morning; unfortunately, I was some distance up the river, seeking a ford and did not reach them in time."

"Wish I knew how they did it," he said. "We'll manage, of course."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Major Foster, who had discerned a woman from afar, and whose face lit up when he saw a beauty.

"Madam," he exclaimed, throwing himself from his horse. Then he advanced, bowing and offering his hand to assist Lucy to descend.

"I do well where I am, sir," she said.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Major Foster, commanding this detachment." Casper winced at his bland assumption of command, but there was nothing he could say or do.

"I am Lucy Lattimer," the girl said simply.

"Not the daughter of my old friend, Colonel Lattimer of Illinois?"

"I have the honor to be the daughter of the late Major Lattimer of Meredith, Alabama, who probably fought and beat your Colonel Lattimer on the field of battle."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Major Foster, with an ingratiating smile. "The war is over."

"Not in the hearts of Southern women, sir."

"The young lady requests us to aid her to cross the river," Casper, irritated at the manner in which the major had taken charge, informed him.

Foster looked him over coldly. "Return to your men and arrange for camp, Lieutenant Molton," he said.

Casper saluted, turned his horse, and rode to the column, now a couple of hundred yards distant.

"May I have the pleasure of your company at lunch, Miss Lattimer?" asked the major with a bow. "I can offer you, perhaps, some delicacies that you may not have among your stores."

"I have not yet reached the point where I meet Northern officers socially," she replied, with ice in her tone.

The major, however, urged:

"But, surely, Miss Lattimer, since we are fellow travelers, you will not refuse the ordinary courtesies of the road?"

"No; I thank you, sir."

The major decided it was better not to importune her. He made another of his bows and retired, just as Casper marched up his weary men.

"Mighty fine gal," the major assured him, after he had dismissed the troops. "Proud as Lucifer. Just refused to lunch with us. Hates the sight of our uniform. I'd like to tame her."

"Yes, sir. I'll make arrangements for crossing the river."

"I command here," exclaimed Foster, suddenly deciding to assert himself, perhaps that the young girl might have no doubt as to his importance. "Hey, you and you!" He picked out two of his horsemen, and by chance selected two ex-Confederates. "Take a line and swim your horses across the river."

"It's a pretty swift river, sir," protested one of the men.

"Nonsense! Be quick about it. Lieutenant, have a rope tied to the end of the line; these fellows can pull it across and fasten it to that cottonwood tree over there. We'll have no difficulty making the passage."

Selecting two members of the disaffected band, instead of sending one from each section of the detachment, upon a hazardous, perhaps fatal mission, seemed bad judgment to Casper; but with the major's mood he did not care to argue. He saw that each man carried a line, and the pair went reluctantly into the river, while the soldiers trooped down to the water's edge to watch the struggle.

THE horses objected, but were driven forward; the water rose over their legs and reached their haunches, and one of them was swept off his feet by the swift current. The animal began to swim vigorously, but was carried downstream; then his rider toppled off his back. The man struggled, but his heavy shoes and accouterments dragged him down. The river carried him a hundred yards along, and he tried to swim ashore; suddenly he threw up his hands and vanished, as a howl of grief and anger rose from the men.

"Come back!" Casper shouted to the second horseman, but it was too late. His horse was already swimming. The man was a clumsy rider, and he could not stay in the saddle. He clung to the animal's mane for a moment, but the horse jerked his head free, and the man slid into the water. At first he made a feeble effort to swim, but soon gave up, drawn down by the swiftly running stream.

"That's too bad," exclaimed Major Foster. "Two men and two good horses, though the horses may get ashore. Call for volunteers, lieutenant."

But Casper was taking off his coat.

"I'll send no more men to their death," he exclaimed. "I'll take the line, myself."

"No, sir!" declared the major. "I won't risk one of my two officers."

"Rule of the service, sir, that men shall not be sent where an officer is afraid to venture. I know how to swim rivers, and I'll get across."

Foster said no more, and Casper kicked off his boots. Lucy hid her face in her hands. She had paled and sorrowed when two men drowned before

her eyes; now that the lieutenant, who interested her, was about to make the attempt she could not turn away.

Molton removed the heavy saddle from his horse and mounted bareback. He fastened the line around his waist, then shook hands with the major and Lieutenant Jones. Charlie bustled forward.

"Don't try to buck the current," he advised. "Let it take you, but edge in. There's plenty of rope."

The galvanized soldiers, who were murmuring loudly at the wanton destruction of two of their numbers, were silent when they saw the officer preparing to follow the drowned pair, and, when the other troops raised a cheer, they joined in it feebly. Casper could not forbear throwing a glance at Lucy, as he mounted his horse. The girl removed her hands from her face and waved encouragement; she could do no less.

With a shout to his horse, Casper Molton dashed into the river, and his momentum carried the beast quite a distance into the stream before the current swept him off his legs. Casper slid out of the saddle, fastened his grip in the animal's tail, after throwing the reins on his neck, and the horse began to swim lustily once relieved of the weight of his rider. Casper clung on, kicking out his own legs, while a group of soldiers began paying out the line rapidly. It was, perhaps, two hundred yards to the opposite shore, but a quarter of a mile of line was released before the horse gripped solid bottom on the opposite side. When the animal emerged, and the lieutenant swung again upon his back, the soldiers cheered for five minutes, while Lucy clapped her hands in delight. Casper waved acknowledgment, rode along the bank until he was opposite the camp, then made his line fast to the tree.

"Send another man over on this line," he shouted. "I can't manage the big rope alone."

A volunteer was quickly found to make the comparatively safe passage, now that a line was stretched across the river. Looping a few yards of rope over the line, he had no trouble swimming to the opposite side. Then began the difficult job of dragging the thick rope, to which the end of the light line was fastened, across the stream. While this feat was in progress, Major Foster left the scene and began to eat his dinner. At last the rope was made fast, and Molton accomplished the return passage without his horse. In one of the wagons he changed to dry underclothes, resumed his coat, and emerged none the worse for his experience.

AS he walked toward the major's fire, he was intercepted by Lucy Lattimer who had finally come down from her wagon.

"May I congratulate you, sir," she said, rather timidly for her. "It was a brave thing you did after those poor men had lost their lives."

"Thank you, Miss Lattimer," he said, flushing with pleasure. "I regret the loss of our soldiers. If I had my way they would not have been sent into the river."

"I am sure of it, sir. May I say that I do not yet see how you are going to get these heavy wagons across, even with the aid of that cable."

He smiled, glad to enlighten her. "They are not called prairie schooners for nothing," he said. "We take off the wheels, remove the canvas covers, tack them around the bottom and sides of the wagons, making them water-tight, lighten the loads, and we have a fleet of boats. We'll swim the animals across."

"Why," she exclaimed, "how ingenious! Is that your own idea?"

"Oh, no! It's an old trick of the emigrants and the army."

"You'll pardon my curiosity, sir."

"It's a pleasure to serve you in any way, miss. Surely, you do not intend to go over the Bozeman Trail alone."

"I must," she declared. "I am not afraid."

"I admire your courage, but I fear for you. At least, you will travel with this escort as far as Fort Appleby, which is three hundred miles along your way."

"I am a Southern woman, sir. I have not the least desire to associate with your army."

"It's *your* army now, Miss Lattimer."

"You know my name? Oh, yes, you heard me tell your commanding officer."

"I knew it before."

"Really, sir? How?"

"I learned it in Julesburg."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "How dared you?" With her head high she turned and went back to her wagon, but in her heart she was glad he had been so interested as to find out her name, back in the dreadful town.

Major Foster, with knitted brows, had watched this encounter, and when Casper came up and saluted, he returned the salute coldly.

"Your spectacular performance seems to have attracted the Southern beauty. I congratulate you, Molton," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"It was highly unnecessary—in fact, very nearly disobedience. One of the men could have done it, if you had told him how."

"We had already lost two men, and we could not risk another."

"Let it pass. How long will it take to get the detachment over?"

"The rest of the day, sir. It's a long job, and we may possibly lose a wagon or two."

"I am considering whether it would not be better to rest here until the river goes down. It's a pleasant spot, the buffalo range is near, and we can cross later without chance of loss."

"It may be a week or ten days, sir, and my orders are to lose no time."

"I am in command, lieutenant."

"Until you transgress my orders, sir. They are explicit that no superior officer may delay me."

"Hum!" growled the major. "A day of reckoning is coming for you, young man. I shall hold you directly responsible for any loss we may sustain."

"I accept the responsibility."

Casper ate his frugal meal glumly, for he knew exactly what the major meant by a "day of reckoning." When the fort was finally reached, and he was fully under the thumb of Major Foster, that officer could trump up charges against him and cashier him; not a pleasant prospect for a man who was trying to do his duty.

CHAPTER XII.

SOUTHERN CHIVALRY.

JONES followed Casper from the mess, when that young man had eaten hastily and escaped from the dour presence of the major.

"There's the devil to pay in my outfit," he declared. "The top sergeant tells me that they are all up in arms over the drowning of those two men. They are saying that they are being picked for all the dirty jobs; that the idea is to get them killed off and save the Yanks. They would have mutinied if you hadn't swum the river, yourself, Molton."

"That's why I did it," said Casper in a low tone. "I told the major not to pick Johnnies, but he paid no attention to me. He didn't have any idea of discriminating against those fellows; it was just bad judgment. Do you look for trouble from them at the crossing?"

"If they were left on this side in a body, I think they'd desert this minute; and if we send them over first, they might turn on us and prevent our crossing. I wish there was some way to disarm them."

"Draw up the two outfits, and we will send them in alternate squads," declared Casper. "We can't disarm them until they show us they mean mischief. I'm going to talk with them. Get your first sergeant to pick five or six of the most intelligent, and assemble them at the rear of the wagons, so the major won't observe anything."

Jones hastened off, and Casper sauntered to the rear, which gave the major an opportunity to approach again the proud Miss Lattimer, who sat in the shade of her wagon on the river bank.

Casper had only a moment to wait before the noncom herded six or eight galvanized soldiers to the spot, the Southerners coming with faces which mirrored both curiosity and resentment.

"At ease, men!" said Casper. "I want to ask you if, during the march so far, you have observed me discriminating against your outfit in any respect. Haven't I divided the tasks equally? Hasn't the Northern contingent walked

as far and done as many chores as you? It's man to man. Speak up!"

A gimlet-eyed, swarthy little sergeant accepted the invitation.

"We ain't got no grudge agin' you, lieutenant," he said. "But the major ain't got no call to pick our men to get drowned."

"I regret that as much as you do," replied Casper. "I understand that you men consider it unfair to be kept in the army after the war is over; but the government isn't treating you any worse than it is treating our own volunteers. I came to Kearney with a battalion of Eastern troops who should have been mustered out when the war ended; instead of which, they got the same deal that was handed to you. You men knew what you were doing when you got out of prison and enlisted for three years in our army. Do you expect the government to keep you in safe spots, while loyal troops are sent against the Indians?"

"When the South surrendered they had ought to let us out of the army," said the spokesman doggedly.

"Perhaps. I am not the government. What I want to tell you men is this: We are moving through a country infested with hostile Indians, whom we can beat off if we stick together like brothers. The Indians don't care whether some of us are from the South and some from the North, because they hate all white men. You can't explain to them that you are involuntary soldiers, because they will scalp you while you are explaining. The only way you can save your skins is to obey orders and never surrender. You saw me go into the river after your men lost their lives."

Several nodded, and there was a murmur of approval.

"I did that to show you that I wouldn't send any man of my command where I wouldn't go myself. The major did not realize that the river was so dangerous, and he happened to pick two of your number because they were mounted and near at hand. Now, if you want this command wiped out, if your hatred of us Yanks is so strong that you are willing to lose your own lives to get us all killed, all you have to do is to lie down when there is an attack. If you have any notion of deserting, remember that it's easier to wipe out one hundred men than it is to wipe out two hundred. All we have to do is to split, and we are lost, both factions.

"Remember, also, that I will not tolerate desertion. If you should break away, I would go after you and clean you out, if it took three quarters of my men, because the Indians would get us, anyway. You took the oath of allegiance, and I will see that you abide by it."

HE looked them over silently. One or two met his eye; others looked guilty and refused to return his gaze.

"On the other hand," Casper continued, "do your duty cheerfully, and we'll all reach the fort in safety. You only have another year or so to serve, and then the government will send you home. I will make a point of calling attention to your good behavior in my report."

He paused. "There is another consideration," he resumed, after a few moments. "In that wagon we found at the river is a lovely young lady from Alabama, the daughter of a Confederate officer, Major Lattimer, of whom some of you may have heard. Perhaps you served with him. She will accompany us to Fort Appleby, and I want her to get there without a hair of her head being harmed. I need your help. Will you give it to me?"

Southern chivalry was not dead even among these dishonored men whom their own countrymen disowned for lack of fortitude in prison. He saw their eyes brighten, and the man who talked for them spoke out again.

"Reckon you are right, lieutenant," he said. "There ain't no sense in us tryin' to cut and run, and we take it as an honor to have a chance to serve the young lady."

"Shake!" said Casper heartily. He grasped the hand of every man among them, and they went back with their heads up and their shoulders squared.

"Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and Daniel Webster rolled into one," ex-

claimed Jones, when the two officers were alone. "That was a master stroke, bringing in the Alabama girl. I bet you those fellows will make no more trouble from now on."

"It's up to me to do some more persuading," said Casper, a trifle sheepishly. "Major Foster invited the girl to accompany us, and she refused. After what I said to those men, I certainly can't take her along against her will, yet she will be a great help if she remains. Besides, it's certain death for her to try to go on alone, but she is headstrong, and she hates us like poison."

"The major is doing the persuading for you," Jones informed him. "Look at the gay 'Lothario!' "

Casper looked, and a pang of something which he did not yet recognize as jealousy ran through him, for Major Foster was standing near the Lattimer wagon, apparently in amiable conversation with the young girl.

Casper spoke to Jones:

"Roll up those wagons to the river bank, begin getting the wheels off some of them, take out most of their loads, and make loops to hold them to the cables. Also nail the covers on the under part of the bodies. We'll send the men over in the wagons, dry-shod, most of them."

"How about the animals?"

"We'll drive them into the river. Without harness or riders, they can all reach the other side, but we'll have a devil of a job rounding them up when we get over. Send over two or three wagons to try out the method, and then fix up Miss Lattimer's prairie schooner for her."

"Very good, sir," said Jones, saluting. A moment later he was seen driving the men at the mean job before them.

THE conversation between the major and Lucy was an argument, instead of a friendly chat, no matter how it might have looked to Molton, a hundred yards away.

"I came to inform you, madam, that my command is entirely at your service," he began, when he had reached the young woman, who immediately rose from the grass and faced him. She bowed, but did not speak. "May I ask the object of your journey to Virginia City?"

"You may ask, sir." Her tone was most discouraging, but the major was not too crestfallen.

"It is not idle curiosity, I assure you. I happen to be in command of this section of the country."

She rolled her eyes. "Laws! Can we never get away from Yankees?" she demanded of the blue sky.

"I am not a Yankee," he declared. "Yankees are inhabitants of northern New England, while I am from New York. My remote ancestors were Dutch."

"All who wear blue uniforms are Yankees to Southern women—and our enemies."

"We were never enemies to Southern women," he declared gallantly.

"Your generals, Grant and Sherman, thought differently, sir."

"Besides," he said with a laugh, "nearly half of my command, although they wear our uniform, are Southerners and your compatriots."

Lucy looked incredulous and angry. "I do not understand you, sir. No Southern man would put on your uniform."

"Nevertheless, several hundred of them did so. They enlisted from our prisons, on condition that they be used only to fight the Indians."

"But that is dastardly. I am sure, I do not challenge your word, sir, but I cannot believe it."

"It's easily proved," laughed the major. "Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir," said a noncom, who was passing.

"Bring over two or three of those galvanized soldiers."

In a moment the sergeant returned, followed by three soldiers who looked at the beautiful young girl with respectful admiration.

" 'Tention!" snapped the major. "You three men served in the rebel army?"

"Confederate, suh," replied one of the men, squaring his shoulders.

"Same thing. What regiment were you in, my man?"

"—th Virginia, suh."

"And you?"

"—th North Carolina."

"And you?"

"—th Alabama, suh."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, with flashing eyes, as the truth of the major's statement was driven home. "You an Alabama soldier—a Southerner! How could you?"

The man flushed, dropped his eyes, and squirmed.

"Wish to God I died first," he muttered.

"Silence!" thundered Major Foster. "Left face—forward march!"

"I presume these poor men were tortured in your prisons," she flashed. "Though, no matter what the situation, I could not credit this if they had not admitted it."

"We are bound for Fort Appleby, away up on the Bozeman Trail, and to that point we shall be glad to escort you, Miss Lattimer."

"Thank you, sir. I prefer to take my chances with the Indians rather than journey with arrogant Yankees and disgraced Southerners."

Major Foster's none-too-even temper slipped its leash.

"When you fall a victim to the cruelty of a band of savages, you may remember us more agreeably," he shot at her, then bowed and turned away.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lucy. "Oh!" The first expletive was anger that the man should dare to speak so to her, the second sudden realization that such an awful fate might easily befall her if she persisted in her determination. Yet she would persist, for her pride was stronger than her terror.

When Casper Molton, taking advantage of the departure of the major, ventured to approach her, he had to bear the full brunt of her outraged feelings. No chance was given him for friendly talk, and she silenced him with her scorn and sought the depths of her wagon when he would have persevered. Shrugging his shoulders, he postponed his plea to her to remain with the detachment. Perhaps she would be in a better humor after she had crossed the river.

THE operation of crossing took up his time during the rest of the day—a difficult, if no longer perilous, task. A dozen volunteers swam the river with the aid of the cable; then the first prairie schooner was launched, made independent of the current by the loops around the cable, and pulled rapidly across by the rope attached to its fore part, the end of which was in the hands of the powerful men on the opposite bank.

The wheels of the schooner had been placed inside, and the vehicle carried a half dozen soldiers with their equipment, who immediately strengthened the rope pullers on the farther bank and made the task of transporting each successive wagon less difficult.

The Lattimer wagon was sent over among the first half dozen. The soldiers replaced its wheels, and Anthony wandered forth in search of his mules, that had swum ashore and landed a quarter of a mile down the river. He recaptured them, not without difficulty, however.

It was dark when the last wagon, animal, and man and all the supplies were safely on the farther shore. Major Foster had already given the order to camp there for the night, and Casper, after making his dispositions, went in search of Lucy Lattimer, hoping to have better luck this time. He searched, but did not find her. He hunted in growing alarm until he found a sergeant, who said:

"Why, the young woman hitched up her mules and drove off, hours ago, lieutenant. We had no instructions to detain her."

"No, no—of course not," he muttered. "Hours ago!" If she drove fast, and she probably had done so, she must be fifteen or twenty miles away by this time, a very good day's march for the detachment. Was the girl demented that she should leave safety and plunge into horrible peril, or did she dislike him so? Perhaps the major had insulted her. If he had, his rank wouldn't protect him

—not if he afterward broke Molton for assaulting a superior officer.

He strode to the tent of the major, already erected—Foster's tent was always the first to go up—and found that officer sitting on a soap box, watching a camp fire of dry twigs and light branches, which his striker had picked up along the river bank which was lightly wooded.

"Everything all right?" asked the major. "Any loss in the passage?"

"Not a thing, sir, though we may have to pick up some of the animals in the morning. They won't stray far. But Miss Lattimer has gone. She drove off hours ago. She ought not to have been allowed to depart, sir."

"She's a vixen," said the major—"a complete fool. I offered her our escort, and she spurned it. Confounded little rebel! A war party will make a meal of her, and it will serve her right."

"May I remind the major that he is speaking of a white woman, a lady?" asked Casper, controlling his anger with difficulty.

"I don't need to be reminded, sir. Would you have me bind her, hand and foot? This is a free country and an open road, and I couldn't make a prisoner of her."

"I beg your pardon, sir. May I take a couple of men and go after her?"

"Oh, she won't go far. That's just bravado. The girl will probably camp a few miles along the road and take good care not to get too far ahead of the detachment."

"You know Indians, sir. A small party might easily capture her, without our knowing anything about it."

"I'll ride forward myself in the morning," said the major easily.

Casper turned away in considerable distress, for, despite his cold shoulder of the afternoon, he couldn't lie down in his blankets when that lovely creature, unprotected save for a cowardly old negro, was a few miles out on the plains, easy prey for any sort of marauders, red or white.

The major had not forbidden him in so many words to go after her, although his intention was plain enough. Casper decided to go. He would probably overtake her in four or five hours and be back in camp by daybreak. This would mean that his services would be available for the outfit, just the same as if he had slept all night. Annoyed as the major might be, if Casper returned with Miss Lattimer, Foster would do no more than reprimand him.

Casper led out his horse, nodded to the sentries, mounted when outside the camp, and set off at a gallop, without even a moon to guide him. However, it was not a blind pursuit, for they would be on the Oregon Trail, and the Oregon Trail was as plain as a pikestaff —a hard-dirt road, beaten into shape by hundreds of thousands of wagon wheels and the hoofs of innumerable horses, mules and cattle. Lucy Lattimer was on the road somewhere ahead; inexperienced as she was, she would not be apt to get off of it, for there were no confusing byroads of more settled country.

CHAPTER XIII.

PERSUASION.

CASPER cantered along, confident that he would find the girl in camp, not more than fifteen, at the most twenty, miles away. His horse was covering ground two or three times as fast as the mules could draw the Lattimer wagon, and he should be able to escort her back to the military encampment before reveille, provided she consented to return. Just what he would do if she did not consent, he did not know; but he was hopeful of his powers of persuasion. After all, she had been glad to see the soldiers, had accepted their aid in crossing the river, and, having had time to cool off, would recognize the advantage of a military escort over such a perilous route.

All of which proved that he did not understand the sort of girl who was Lucy Lattimer. Having rested all day, Anthony had slept for many hours, and the mules were fresh. Lucy had decided to put as many miles between herself and the haughty major as she could manage. Attracted as she was by the handsome face and manly bearing of Casper Molton, she took a womanly satisfaction in

showing him, also, that she did not need his escort. Accordingly, she did not make camp when darkness overtook her. Despite the protests of Anthony, she forced the mules along as fast as they could drag the creaking, lumbering, three-ton wagon, and all through the night it rumbled along the trail. Lucy estimated that she could average at least a mile an hour better than the foot soldiers, probably two miles an hour. If she got twenty-five miles ahead of them, they would never overtake her in the world. However, she consented to crawl into the wagon and sleep, after the night was three or four hours old. Anthony, who did not share her desire to get very far ahead of the troops, then permitted the animals to slow to a walk.

Casper fathomed her intentions when he had ridden for four or five hours without overtaking the wagon, and he realized that he could never get back to camp with the girl in time to avoid trouble. He would be absent without leave, a heinous offense for an officer, in the face of the enemy. Nevertheless, he did not draw rein. The sky grew gray behind him, but his eyes peered into the darkness until dawn overtook him and passed him, and gradually the road ahead became visible, and he saw, bobbing along, several miles in front, the white top of the wagon. Now he drove his tired horse and rapidly overhauled the Lattimer vehicle, which was crawling, while Anthony's head had fallen on his breast, and the girl slept, not too peacefully, behind him.

The officer rode up beside the wagon and smiled at the sight of the sleeping driver, whose reins had fallen upon the backs of the mules. He picked up the reins and drew up the animals, and the absense of motion woke up Anthony, whose terrified eyes calmed when he saw the uniform.

"For de Lord's sake, Mister Soldier!" he exclaimed. "I thought you was Indians."

THEN a beautiful face, pink with sleep, with heavy lids half shielding beautiful dark eyes, and with hair that was considerably disordered, poked itself up from behind the driver's seat. In the half-conscious state of just waking up, her true feelings were displayed, and she smiled at Casper Molton. In fact, she had been dreaming of him. Then she snapped into full wakefulness, and the smile was replaced by a frown.

"Pray, sir, what are you doing here?" she demanded. "I hoped I had left you and your soldiers miles behind."

Casper had removed his cap and swung off his horse. Being a man, he did not know that she resented his seeing her before she had a chance to fix her hair and make some sort of a toilet.

"I came after you to fetch you back," he said tactlessly. "It's madness for you to travel alone when I have two hundred men who would lay down their lives for you."

With the skill of a graceful woman, Lucy contrived to swing over into the seat beside the negro.

"Drive on, Anthony!" she said.

"I beseech you, Miss Lattimer, not to be rash," pleaded Casper. "I have ridden all night to overtake you, because I realize, if you do not, the terrible danger you are running. You do not need to travel with our troops, but at least agree to keep within easy reaching distance. Won't you turn back with me?"

Lucy shot him an impudent smile, reached for the reins, and put them in Anthony's hands. "I cannot accommodate myself to the snail's pace of your soldiers," she said. "Besides, the air of the prairie is refreshing when not tainted by the odor of Yankees. Please draw aside, as it would annoy me to run over you."

Casper held his ground, and the negro looked irresolute. Then, as Lucy frowned at him, Anthony sighed heavily and clucked to his mules. The wagon moved, and Casper jumped hastily aside. In a few seconds it was past him, whereupon he leaped into the saddle and overtook it speedily.

"For the last time, will you turn back?" he pleaded.

"Faster, Anthony!" said Lucy coolly.

With a smothered expletive, Casper drew his revolver and leveled it at the negro.

"Stop that wagon!" he commanded harshly. Anthony checked the team with great haste.

"Turn around!" commanded the officer.

Lucy made a swoop at Anthony, grasped the reins from his hands, threw a look of defiance at Casper, and in tones of biting scorn exclaimed:

"I presume even a Yankee officer won't shoot a woman. Getap!"

"No," said Casper slowly, and returned the weapon to its holster. Then, as the wagon began to move, he drove his horse close, leaned forward, grasped the girl under the arms, and with an easy motion swung her to his saddle, regardless of the piercing scream which she emitted.

"Anthony," he said with a mad laugh, "if you want your mistress, come after her."

HE set out at a gallop back over the trail. Anthony, with a happy grin, began to turn the wagon around. However, a young, healthy, strong, and angry woman, who at bottom is in no fear of the man who has captured her, can make a deal of trouble for him. One of his arms was about her waist, the other held his rein, which gave Lucy free play with both her hands, and for the first time in years he remembered that pretty kittens have claws.

Lucy began by scratching at his face; then her heart smote her at marring a good-looking man, so she fastened her grip upon his luxuriant black hair, knocking off his slouch hat to get a better hold. Her heels beat a sharp tattoo upon his right thigh and knee, and his face was contorted with anguish at the pulling of his hair. Nevertheless, he suffered like a Stoic until Lucy's heart smote her at the pain she was causing. Whereupon she ceased her physical demonstration and resorted to woman's most potent weapon—tears. Now she was much more effective.

"Miss Lattimer," Casper said—and she saw that there were tears also in his eyes—"it breaks my heart to do violence like this, but I honestly believe I am saving your life."

"What right have you to save my life?" she wailed. "My life is my own. You put me right back in my wagon."

"If you will promise me to accept our escort, it will be a pleasure," he declared rather untruthfully. For, now that she did not struggle, he was thrilled by her close proximity.

Suddenly she smiled—a dazzling smile, like a rainbow after a cloud.

"It seems I have no choice, sir," she said. "If you will set me down, I will accompany you—under duress, of course."

"I thank you," he said so gratefully that she was amused. Then he rode back to the wagon and reluctantly placed her back in her seat, while he rode alongside. Lucy thought it best to sulk, although, now that the die was cast, she was glad enough to be assured of protection during the greater part of her journey. She cast sidelong glances at him, as he rode beside the wagon, and she decided that he was as attractive as she had thought him that night in Jules-burg, only more so.

Unaware that he stood so high in her estimation, Casper was now alarmed at his temerity and stricken with shyness; he did not know how he had the courage to treat her as he had done; certainly, she never would forgive him.

Then she spoke, so sweetly and gently that he was astounded.

"You are bleeding in the neck, sir. I fear my nails were sharp. Won't you use my handkerchief?"

His gratitude was pitiful, and she smiled in satisfaction. It was evident that she had captured this Yankee lieutenant. Still, he would be made to pay for his impudence—later.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAJOR SNAPS THE WHIP.

IF Major Walter Foster has been shown in a rather unfavorable light up to the present time in this story, it is due to circumstances over which the author has no control, and because he is biased in favor of Casper Molton; in truth, there are very few senior officers who would not have resented the attitude of the

lieutenant quite as sharply as the major and perhaps have shown even less tact. Foster was a striking-looking man, still sufficiently youthful, who had been something of a lady's man in the East. He admired himself rather more than was necessary, and his lines had been laid in pleasant places until his Western assignment. Foster hated the country, the Indians, and the absence of what he considered society. While he was not a coward, it made his flesh creep to imagine what the redskins would do to him if he fell into their hands, yet he was so inexperienced in their ways that he was confident that a thousand of them would run from a handful of soldiers, and so uninformed that he supposed that he could see an Indian as far as the savage could see him; all of which made him one of the worst persons in the world to command a detachment invading a country filled with hostiles.

Technically, Lieutenant Molton was right in attempting to cling to his independent command, and Walter Foster knew it. An officer placed in command of a detachment, with special orders, should remain in command until he has carried out his instructions, and a superior officer who joins that detachment ought to be treated only as an attached officer.

Furthermore, the major had no business to be lingering in Sedgwick, instead of proceeding to his post with the utmost dispatch; but his excuse to himself had been that the general would not wish him to go forward with two or three men; much better to wait until he could join a wagon train or a military convoy, although he was aware that messengers were making the journey, unattended, very regularly.

His vanity, however, would not permit him to travel as attached, when the commander was two grades below him in rank; yet his bump of discretion had prevented him from asserting himself definitely, while in Sedgwick, because Major Staehl might be called as a witness at some future time to prove that Lieutenant Molton had been superseded —in case of disaster, of course. Therefore, he had waited until they were well upon their way before he told Casper Molton just where he got off.

Being fond of his ease, it satisfied him to be in nominal command. Foster was prepared, as Casper suspected, to claim all credit and dodge all blame. He enjoyed hunting and riding and wanted to indulge himself on the trip, something the active commander of the outfit could not do. In case his behavior was ever questioned, he could excuse such conduct by the statement that he considered Lieutenant Molton actually in charge of the outfit. Nevertheless, the resentment which Molton could not entirely conceal angered him, and he was biding his time to get even, for he held in his hand a trump—the fact that Molton would be compelled to report to him at Fort Appleby and serve under him.

The sudden appearance of a very lovely young woman, blond in coloring —and he adored blondes—had been welcomed by him as a gift from heaven. He saw himself acting as her guide and friend, taking her for long gallops, chatting to her by the camp fire, and impressing upon her his personality and importance. He had made the most cordial overtures, and he had been sharply repulsed. Her hasty departure he considered as a direct rebuke to himself. Having considered her as his personal property, it annoyed him that Molton should display an interest in her. He had seen their comparatively friendly conversation—friendly compared to his own reception—and he had added it to the score against the unfortunate lieutenant.

In the morning he planned to take his little band of horsemen, reduced by two because of his own stupidity in ordering men with full equipment into the river, ride upon the trail of the girl, and induce her to return. This plan explained his unwillingness to permit Casper to go after her.

THE troops were up at five in the morning, and young Jones, going to awaken Molton, found him gone, and the sentries informed him that he had taken his horse and ridden to the west alone. This did not surprise Jones, for

he understood the reason for the journey of his friend. Duty, however, compelled him to report the absence of the officer to the major.

"Do you mean to say that Lieutenant Molton left the camp without permission, has been gone all night, and has not returned?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jones disconsolately.

"Why, this is terrible—unheard of! That the commander of this organization should so forget his duty as to desert it——"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I supposed the major was in command."

"Of course—of course! But, because of his special orders, I left things in his hands. Have you any idea where he went?"

"I presume he chased after that Alabama girl. He was afraid the Indians would get her."

"I refused him permission last night, which makes the offense more serious. Well, Jones, get your men ready. We march at once. If Molton has not deserted——"

"Of course he hasn't deserted, sir!" exclaimed Jones.

"You forget yourself, sir."

"Beg the major's pardon," said Jones, saluting.

"I was about to say we shall encounter him returning upon the trail."

In a quarter of an hour the detachment, followed by its line of white-topped wagons, was moving along the road, the major riding at the head of the column, turning over in his mind the situation that had arisen. In one way he was satisfied, since Molton had made a false step and placed himself in the major's power. He could cashier him for deserting his post in the face of the enemy—Foster assumed that in this country they were always in face of the enemy—and there would be no chance of General Stone receiving from Molton an account of his own not-too-regular course of action.

On the other hand, the fellow was young and good looking and would have been some hours alone with the girl, provided he did induce her to accompany him, which would handicap the commander in the campaign he proposed to wage for her affections, provided she traveled with the outfit for the next few weeks. Molton had stolen a march on his superior officer, which was not forgivable, and for that he must be punished, if for nothing else. The major had hoped that the girl would return voluntarily; he did not wish to coerce her and gain her ill will; but, if Molton failed, he would try his own hand at persuasion.

However, he could not understand the failure of Molton to return earlier. It must mean that Miss Lattimer had secured a very long lead, or perhaps the Indians had swooped down upon them both. This was a contingency which he did not like to consider, for he hoped they would get to Fort Laramie before they need bother about the savages.

About nine o'clock Buffalo Charlie, who had ridden ahead, returned to report that he had seen a solitary wagon moving toward them, and soon it was in view of the major. That meant that Molton had persuaded her, and Foster was to have gentle company during the rest of the journey. He could almost forgive the lieutenant for his success. At the same time, Casper, seeing the troops, suggested that Anthony stop and turn his wagon, waiting beside the trail until the soldiers reached him. With a word of farewell to Lucy, who gave him a half smile, he continued alone toward the approaching column. Molton understood perfectly that he had committed a serious offense and was quite sure that Major Foster would not overlook it. In all probability he had ruined his career in the army, yet he was glad because he had saved Lucy Lattimer. Lucy, of course, had no notion what the young man had risked in his quixotic night ride. As a matter of fact, she was very sleepy and had hardly spoken a word since he had restored her to her seat.

HE rode steadily toward the soldiers, then saluted when he reached the major, and turned his horse about to fall in by the side of his judge, from whose expression he deduced that he was in for serious trouble.

"You left your command without notifying me, absented yourself all night, and rejoin us after we are several hours on the road," said the major sternly.

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"I thought the major might have forbidden me to ride after Miss Lattimer, and I considered her in grave danger," replied Casper truthfully.

"Miss Lattimer was in no danger in this part of the country, as I informed you, and your action was that of a man not fit to be intrusted with a command. I think it is very fortunate that I superceded you."

"Had I been in command, I should not have gone forward, but would have sent after Miss Lattimer. As I do not appear to be in command, I committed a slight breach of duty to save a young and beautiful and headstrong girl, sir."

"It is my duty to place you under arrest and confine you to your quarters until a court-martial can sit on your case," declared the major.

"Begging the major's pardon, I was placed in command of this detachment, and, technically, I am in command until I have carried out my orders to deliver it at Fort Appleby. Your status, sir, is that of an attached officer, but, because you insisted upon your rank, I yielded, with mental reservations, that I would obey your orders if they did not conflict with the safety and speed of the expedition. I consider that placing me under arrest would seriously hamper and perhaps endanger our progress, therefore I most respectfully request that you issue no such order."

"And if I did, sir?"

"I would refuse to obey it, sir, and defy you to enforce it."

The major's eyes flashed, but his reply was coldly considered.

"Nevertheless, you have committed a serious breach of duty, one which might well have had dire results, because, being unaware that you had left camp, I did not personally make an inspection before retiring. As the soon-to-be commander of a fort, in dire need of these reënforcements and supplies, I am as eager as yourself for their expeditious delivery. While I disagree with you as to your importance to the success of the expedition, it would be extremely inconvenient to have an officer under arrest, with a moving column. I cannot spare men to send you back to Fort Kearney, and I do not wish to create a bad effect upon the men by a conflict of authority. For these reasons, I am not arresting you, but I shall not overlook the matter, and I shall prefer charges against you when we reach our destination."

Casper Molton saluted gravely.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I do not expect the offense to be overlooked."

"Have Miss Lattimer's wagon placed at the head of the train, where she will suffer less from the dust. I shall go forward and pay my respects to her," said the major, who then touched spurs to his horse and darted ahead.

Casper looked after him with some admiration. "The old fox," he muttered. "He'll now take credit with Miss Lattimer for what I did and see that I am court-martialed for doing it, when he gets me where it is safe to take out his spite on me."

To Jones, who had ridden forward as soon as he saw the major gallop ahead, he extended his hand with an apology.

"I'm very sorry not to have been on the job, this morning, old man," he explained. "I suppose the major created a tremendous disturbance."

"He was as sore as a bear, and he made your offense out as black as possible," admitted Jones. "If some Indian doesn't scalp him before we get to Appleby, you are going to lead the life of a hound pup in the fort."

"I'll be court-martialed and cashiered; lucky if I don't go to a military prison," declared Casper glumly.

"I hope the young lady will appreciate what you did for her and will try to make it up to you."

"I doubt if she will be very friendly. I had to make a show of force to persuade her to turn around, and she is as proud as Lucifer and hates our uniform like poison."

"Look at Madam Foster making up to her now," said Jones. "What a good time he will have playing the gallant, as

a result of your outrageous conduct. Didn't he put you under arrest?"

"He suggested it, but I defied him. The man is yellow. Had I been in his shoes and somebody else in mine, I would have taken his saber and placed a guard over him, for what I said to him."

"Cheer up!" grinned Jones. "We have a long way to go, and some Indian may oblige us yet."

CHAPTER XV.

CHIEF JOHN BIG MOUNTAIN.

AFTER the noonday halt, the detachment continued on its weary way, with the wagon of Miss Lattimer in the position suggested by the major. Casper rode soberly ahead, and the major dropped back and walked his horse alongside the wagon containing the Southern beauty.

Perhaps, because she thought it as good a way as any to pay off Lieutenant Molton for his audacity in taking her in his arms, Lucy was affable to the senior officer, and Casper, looking back very often, saw her in converse with Major Foster, who was twisting his blond mustache with an air of satisfaction.

The heat that afternoon was intense, the sun pouring down on the shadeless earth and causing great suffering among the heavily armed soldiers. Although their knapsacks were piled in wagons, the old army rifles weighed fully ten pounds, and the men wore their winter uniforms; their fatigue caps were little protection from the sun. Four men fainted by the roadside and were placed in a wagon by their comrades, who grumbled among themselves and murmured that it was criminal not to make camp because of the heat. Had Casper been in sole command, he might have taken pity upon them, but, after his argument upon the need for dispatch, he dared not take upon himself such a step. However, he made the halts longer and more frequent, without drawing down the wrath of the major, who now had so completely the whip hand.

The column resumed its march about four o'clock, after a halt of twenty minutes, when Buffalo Charlie came galloping down the trail, waving his broad hat. He reined up so abruptly that his horse reared on its haunches.

"Injuns!" he said. "Big war party coming down from a ridge, about six miles ahead. Ye can't see 'em yet, but you will soon."

"Any notion how large a party?"

"Oh, 'bout three or four hundred."

"Do you think they will attack us?"

"No—not less they get big reënforcements. They come to look us over. Good thing you brought that fool gal back; she would have walked plum into 'em."

"Think we ought to circle the wagons and intrench ourselves?"

"Just what they want. They'd hold us here for weeks. Thing to do is keep moving till dark. They won't come close enough to shoot."

"I'll have to tell the major," said Casper, "and we'd better halt until we decide what to do. Oh, Lieutenant Jones!"

Jones came dashing up.

"Indians approaching. Have the men load their guns. Draw the wagons up in three lines, so they won't extend so far, and deploy the men along the planks of the wagons as skirmishers. I'll tell the major."

The halt of the column had already drawn the major forward.

"Why this unnecessary delay?" he demanded. "You have just had a rest of twenty minutes."

"Indians approaching, sir, so Charlie reports. I am closing up the wagons and deploying the men as skirmishers around them; but I think we should keep moving forward until nightfall. They are not numerous enough to attack, and, if they do, the men can retreat to the wagons and fight from behind them."

The major was no coward, and he had the confidence of two hundred rifles. "A little brush will relieve the monotony," he said. "I am curious to see what a war party looks like."

He did not have long to wait, for the horsemen of the plains were already visible ahead, and they were spreading out like a fan. In a quarter of an hour they were fairly close, and Casper was re-

lieved to see that Charlie had overestimated their numbers, for there were less than three hundred of them. They were interesting to see.

Most of them were almost naked, but the chief wore the uniform of a general officer in the United States army—a dress coat of blue, with brass buttons and huge epaulets. It was a preposterous costume and incomplete, for he was in moccasins instead of jack boots, and he wore feathers in his long hair. They could see that the faces and bodies of the Indians were smeared with bright paint; unquestionably, a war party. Casper ran his eye over the array and was relieved to note that there were not more than fifty or sixty guns among them, and most of them looked like the old muzzle-loading rifles of the Civil War. The others carried bows with quivers of feather-tipped arrows slung over the shoulders.

The shortened, but thickened, column moved steadily forward, while the noncoms were heard instructing the men to keep separated, so as not to present the target of a mass of soldiers.

"Better call a parley!" said the major. "They must have sense enough to know they can't attack a strong force like this."

"Won't do a bit of good," grumbled Charlie.

Casper halted the detachment, while the scout rode forward with his hand lifted in the traditional sign of peace. The Indians also halted, spread in a great semicircle ahead of the column, and a minor chief advanced to greet the old plainsman.

They conversed in Indian sign language, a very amazing method of communication, more flexible, capable of more fluent converse than any system of signs invented by either civilized or barbarous peoples in any age.

As there were many languages and dialects among the North American Indians, and as the savages rarely had sufficient energy or intelligence to learn the languages of their neighbors, such a system of communication was very necessary, and it was understood by both Indians and frontiersmen.

THEY conversed for five or six minutes in dumb show. Then Buffalo Charlie returned and reported to the major.

"They are Sioux," he said. "The fellow with General Grant's uniform is Chief John Big Mountain. He says that his nation is at war with the white men and wants you to return where you came from. Behind him are more Indians than there are leaves on the trees in the big forests. They have destroyed all the forts ahead."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the major.

"Just Indian lies—big talk to cover the fact that he hasn't enough men to wipe us out. I asked him what he was doin' this side of Laramie, and he said that Red Cloud had burned Laramie and killed all the soldiers. I told him he was a liar."

"You go back and tell him to get out of our path, or we'll wipe him out," said the major. Charlie turned obediently, and the parley was resumed. Hardly had the scout rejoined the column, when the Indians were in motion. They spread in a big circle, but took care to keep out of range, though they pointed their guns and thrust arrows in position upon their bows.

Chief John Big Mountain, like a true general, sat his horse well to the rear of his warriors, but now he put his hand to his mouth and sent forth that weird, wild shriek known as the Indian war whoop—a whoop which was immediately taken up by the entire crew. Of the detachment, only Buffalo Charlie and Casper Molton had ever heard the war whoop delivered by a band of hostiles preparatory to an attack, and its effect upon the soldiers was just what the chief calculated it would be—absolutely terrifying.

Lucy, brave as she was, clung to the arm of Anthony, who turned as near ashen as a coal-black person could, and his chattering teeth rattled like a box full of dice, and his tongue was babbling prayers that started from the bottom of his soul. Lucy's face was pale, too. Though she had visualized Indians in her mind's eye, they had never seemed as horrible as these, and she needed no

one to tell her that she had been driving right into the midst of this band, when bold Casper Molton had snatched her from the wagon seat and galloped back with her along the trail, until she agreed to listen to reason.

Though she was protected by a band of soldiers, she did not feel entirely safe. It was the habit of Southern women to combine the adjective, "cowardly," with the noun, "Yankee," during the war; besides, it did not seem possible that ordinary, slouching white men, even in uniform, could resist such a formidable array of ferocious savages.

Suddenly the wagon began to move, though Anthony had dropped the reins. The column had started forward, and her mules took up the march without command.

Lieutenant Jones had grasped the rifle from the hands of a scared soldier, who was about to begin the battle. It is fear which usually causes the first blow to be struck in any contest, and word had gone along the line to refrain from firing. Neither did the Indians discharge a gun, but, as the soldiers began to move along beside the wagon train, the savage horsemen turned about and kept pace with it, at a distance of three or four hundred yards on either side of the trail.

Major Foster fumed, as he rode along.

"Damn the government!" he exclaimed. "Think of sending foot soldiers to fight mounted Indians. We can't drive them away; they have the initiative in their hands. Infantry can't charge cavalry, nor can we shoot them while they keep out of gunshot."

"I don't think they want to fight," said Casper. "They may try to run off some of our stock to-night, or they may shoot into the camp from the safety of the darkness, but this display is pure bravado. Old Johnny Mountain thinks he needs a thousand warriors to tackle two hundred soldiers, in broad daylight, on the plains."

"Damn impudent," growled the major. "I wish I had twenty mounted men, and I'd charge them, all right."

"You'd never come back, major," declared Charlie. "They're trying to make us mad so we'll do something like that."

Confident that the soldiers would not open the battle, one stalwart brave, suddenly rode within a couple of hundred feet of the head of the column and began hurling taunts and invectives, which were not understandable, but the import of which was obvious. Major Foster fingered his revolver.

"I could pot that fellow with my six-shooter," he said. "Might as well reduce their number by one."

"Hadn't we better let them open the ball?" suggested Casper.

"I suppose so. The government assumes they are peaceful until they actually fire upon us," grumbled the major.

BUT the defiant warrior must have sensed that he was provoking them too far, for he swerved about and galloped rearward; then, as he was almost out of range, he turned in his saddle, put his gun to his shoulder, and fired directly at the two officers. Almost at the same instant a bullet dropped him from his horse, for the scout, sensing what the savage was about to do, had taken aim and fired a second after the Indian pulled the trigger. It was the signal for a volley from the circle of soldiers about the wagon, whose shots all fell short. Now the strategy of the aborigines was apparent, for, with one accord, they charged toward the wagons.

Until recently most of the troops that had been sent against Indians were armed with muzzle-loading rifles, which, after being discharged, required considerable time to be reloaded. The natives had been maneuvering to draw a volley, although out of range; then, while the soldiers were reloading, they proposed to charge in and open a devastating fire at close quarters, before the boys in blue were ready again for action. This method of warfare had been very effective in the past. But General Stone had seen to it that these troops were armed with the new breech-loading rifle, which required only a few seconds for the men to eject the empty cartridge, insert a fresh one, and reopen fire. A second burst of rifle fire stopped the charge, toppled a score of Indians from their horses, and caused them to turn about

and retreat in haste. Casper could not repress an exclamation of admiration when he saw the wild riders lean over, almost to the ground, and pick up several wounded warriors. He observed several dead Indians lifted, in a flash, between two horses, as the savages beat a retreat. Many of the soldiers were able to send a third shot after the red men before they got out of range. Today, when we have rifles which shoot a stream of bullets for a mile, with accuracy, it is difficult to realize that the repeating rifle was still unused in the West of 1866. As a matter of fact, there were several types of repeaters on the market at that period, but they had not been adopted by the army, which had made the transition from muzzle-loaders to breech-loading rifles with astonishing slowness.

At the moment, most of the soldiers in the Western forts were still armed with muzzle-loaders, although many Indians carried breech-loading rifles, sold to them by the Indian department of the government, to enable them to hunt buffalo and other game.

Casper made a tour of the wagon train and was delighted to find that not a man had received a scratch, while at least thirty Indians had been killed or wounded. He issued instructions, in case of another charge, for the men to fall flat on their stomachs, as they could operate breechloaders with ease in such a position. In the meantime, the train continued its slow march.

The Indians followed, being more careful than ever to keep out of range, though a brave would occasionally dash toward the train, for fifty yards or so, fire his gun, and gallop away. At dusk the major decided to camp for the night. The wagons were drawn up in a circle, sacks of flour and packages of provisions, barrels of groceries and bundles of hay were taken from the cart, and placed beneath them, to form some protection against gunfire from the darkness. Sentries were sent out, twenty yards from camp, with instructions to lie flat on the ground, open fire if they noticed signs of an attack, and then squirm their way back to the protection of the wagons. No camp fires were lighted, lest the flames guide the savage marksmen; supper was eaten in darkness and silence, and the soldiers sat on the ground, with their rifles within reach. The horses and mules were herded within the corral made by the wagons, for their capture would very seriously cripple the outfit.

There was no moon, and a few lanterns were absolutely necessary to prevent men and animals from getting hopelessly mixed up; but their light was carefully shaded, and, after supper, they were extinguished.

THE Indians, protected by the dark, rode within a short distance of the train and maintained a dropping fire for some time, which did no damage, but which had a most depressing effect upon the soldiers, because they could not see a target at which to shoot. After a while, the firing ceased, as the Indians could not afford to waste ammunition, of which they rarely had a large supply. Eventually silence fell upon the plains.

Casper, after making all his dispositions, sought out Lucy, whom the major had placed in the very center of the circle, and for whom he had erected a small tent. The major was by her side, and Casper was compelled to turn away; without an invitation he could not intrude upon a superior officer who was speaking with a lady.

The camp was relapsing into slumber, and only the officers and the sentinels were wakeful, when there came a dart of flame and the report of a gun apparently inside the corral. A second shot followed, and a sentry without shouted:

"I got that fellow!"

A very audacious savage had crept upon his stomach past the sentries, crawled under a wagon, poked his rifle between the wagon bottom and a bundle of hay, and taken a random shot into the mass of sleeping men. One of the sentries had seen the rifle flash, fired where he supposed the marksman's head might be, and scored a lucky hit.

The Indian's bullet had struck a sleeping soldier in the breast, penetrated the heart, and killed him instantly.

The war whoops shrilled weirdly out in the darkness, a burst of firing followed, and was quickly answered by the sentries, who then obeyed instructions and crawled hastily into the wagon corral. The expected attack did not come, however, and the night dragged on interminably, with no more sleep for the defenders.

When the sun appeared, and it was possible to see, there was not an Indian in sight. John Big Mountain had decided he was wasting his time warring with such a strong force, and he had drawn off his men some time during the small hours, probably to seek easier game.

LATE the next afternoon they saw the ruins of a wagon train, undoubtedly the same which had crossed the river while Lucy and her negro had been wandering far afield in search of a ford.

Buffalo Charlie surmised that the ill-fated outfit had encountered the big war party the previous morning and was too weak to offer much resistance. There were six dead men lying on the ground, all minus their scalps and badly mutilated. No bodies of women or children were visible. If there had been women and children with the train, no doubt they had been carried into captivity. After being looted, the wagons had been set on fire, and only the charred wheels and iron frames and plates remained of six wagons.

"Is that snow?" demanded Major Foster, pointing to several heaps of white stuff lying beside the trail. Casper laughed. It did not seem possible that the commanding officer knew so little of the people he was coming out to fight.

"It's flour," he explained.

"But why waste flour?"

"It's of no use to the Indians, sir. They don't know how to make bread."

"Then what do they eat?"

"Nothing but meat, when they can get it; occasionally fruit and berries, but meat three times a day."

"It's a wonder it doesn't kill them."

"Their active life burns it out."

"It doesn't seem possible that they can be so ignorant," mused the major. "They seem to exhibit some intelligence in waging war. If I am not mistaken, Indians in the East and South used to raise corn and other crops, spin cloth, weave baskets, and really had some knowledge of domestic arts and agriculture."

"That is true, sir, but the Indians of the plains never stay long enough in one place to till the soil, and they have forgotten any knowledge of crafts they ever possessed. For years they have dressed themselves in odds and ends of clothes which they have stolen from wagon trains or in looting settlements of whites. The only reason they bothered to empty the bags of flour was to use the bags for loin cloths or shirts."

"Miserable savages," grunted the major. "With two hundred mounted troops of these foot soldiers, I could sweep them out of the country."

Casper repressed a smile. "General Connor set out with four thousand men last year, campaigned all summer, and then withdrew, with about two thirds of his force killed, wounded, sick, or missing."

"Because the savages wouldn't stand up and fight. And he had more infantry than cavalry. Of all insane bureaucratic ideas, sending footmen after horsemen——" The major broke off suddenly, remembering his intention of preferring charges against the lieutenant. Under the circumstances, it would never do for him to make outspoken criticism of superiors.

They halted long enough to bury the victims of Indian outrage, several of whom had been mutilated as well as scalped; all had been stripped of their clothing, for the Indians had no qualms against wearing dead men's garments.

During the halt, Jones whispered to Casper that Miss Lattimer wished to speak to him, and the young man hastened to her wagon, which the major had turned out of line, so that she should not see the ghastly corpses which were strewn on the ground.

Lucy was pale, but collected. Her big eyes revealed the terror of the night before and what she knew had hap-

pened on this spot. She smiled slightly at Casper and extended her hand, as he rode his horse close to the wagon seat.

"I wished to speak to you, sir," she said, "to express my appreciation of your generosity in pursuing me and forcing me to return with you, after I had behaved so ungraciously at the river."

Casper bowed, flushed with pleasure. "I am thankful I had audacity enough to insist, Miss Lattimer."

"I knew there was danger, of course, but I had never seen wild Indians, and I did not dream they were so horrible. I suppose I had a foolish woman's idea that they would permit harmless folks to pass. I am alone in the world, and I do not know exactly what awaits me at Virginia City. I had a feeling that what would come to pass was foreordained. It was appalling last night in camp, while they howled like wolves, in the darkness around us; but to-day the dreadfulness of Indian warfare has been brought home to me. I saw that wagon train just after it had crossed the river, and if I could have overtaken it—if I could have made the crossing by myself—I would have joined it, in which case I would have shared the fate of the poor people in it. Were there any women?"

"We don't know," he replied. "There were six men killed, and we are burying them now. If there were women, they have been taken captive."

"The poor souls!" she exclaimed. "Can't you pursue the savages and save them."

"Unfortunately we are not cavalry, and we could not overtake them. We can only avenge these unfortunate people upon the next band which attacks us."

"I understand from Mr. Jones that you embarrassed yourself in going after my wagon, sir," she said hesitatingly; "that you committed a breach of duty. I am very sorry."

His eyes glowed until she dropped her own fine orbs beneath his gaze. "Any slight inconvenience I may suffer for saving you from the fate of these emigrants will be a joy to me," he declared.

"You are very gallant, sir," she murmured. "Lieutenant Molton, I am finding chivalry among you Northerners."

"We are the same people, North and South," he declared. "It was a brother's quarrel."

Seeing the major beckoning, he touched his hat and spurred forward, just as the last clods fell upon the bodies of the dead emigrants. As was the custom, they were buried, not beside the trail, but in the middle of the road. The bugle sounded "Taps," the men who had bared their heads replaced their caps, and the column moved again. The soldiers marched over the big grave, and then the mules drew the wagons over them, so that, when the last wagon had passed, there was no evidence of recently upturned earth. This was done that the savages might not return to dig up and further mutilate the dead—a thing they had been known to do—and to keep coyotes or other animals from uncovering the bodies in a search for meat.

CHAPTER XVI.

FORT LARAMIE.

THE few words with the young woman had thrilled and delighted Casper Molton, who plodded along at the head of the line very blithely, and he did not glower when he observed that the major had dropped back to ride near the girl. It had been very gracious of her to send for him to make her apologies and to extend her thanks, and he rejoiced that she was not as bitter against her former enemies as she had been.

During his service in the South, Casper had never known of a case of rudeness offered to a Southern woman by an officer or soldier in the commands to which he had been attached; but he had heard of such things in other organizations, and there were rumors that no gallantry was exhibited by the Northern army during Sherman's march to the sea. It was no wonder that the Southern women were bitter, and women always hate longer than men.

Lucy had said that she was not certain how she would be received in Virginia City. In that case, why was she bound thither? Surely, she might have gone back to the South after the death of her father. Why had she plunged

into the wilderness, and dared the appalling perils of the trail, if no security awaited her in the great mining city?

What would be the fate of a young and unusually lovely woman in a town whose evil reputation, during the few short years of its existence, had spread to the four corners of the world? Virginia City had sprung into being with the discovery of gold in the hills surrounding it, and it had been settled at first by men from California and Oregon.

The richness of its mines was fabulous; huge fortunes were made overnight and were spent almost as fast as they were made. Within a year of its discovery it had four thousand people, and in 1866 it boasted fifteen thousand inhabitants, though no accurate or really truthful census was ever made. Ten years later it had become a village of less than a thousand people. That was the fate of the mining towns of the '60s.

Curiously enough, there were two Virginia Cities, that of Montana and that of Nevada, whose histories and progress were very similar, and whose fate was also the same. The Nevada city also had a mushroom growth, produced more millionaires than the Montana camp, surpassed it in wildness, though not in crime, in the grandeur of its wooden buildings, its theaters, its cafés, and its dance halls. Remote as the Montana bonanza town might be, it was more accessible from the East than the Nevada Golconda, and it drew the bulk of the overland emigrants, while the Nevada town was peopled from California. By the time the fame of the two cities had crossed the Mississippi, they had merged into one vast Babylon, the streets of which were paved with gold.

Casper had heard that the cost of living in Virginia City was unbelievably high—that a boiled egg sold for a dollar, a plate of corned beef brought five dollars, and rooms in the hotels and boarding houses came to ten dollars per day. If Miss Lattimer had no money—and from what the redoubtable Red Ike of Julesburg had told him, she must be without funds—she would starve to death, unless there were friends there who loved her and would care for her.

It was unthinkable to let her go on after the expedition reached Fort Appleby, yet, if she did not continue, what would she do in a small, isolated post, inhabited only by soldiers and a few resolute officer's wives?

In an age when helplessness and dependency were a cult among women, Casper knew that Southern women of good family had cultivated it to the utmost; that they were waited upon at every turn. They could neither sew nor spin, nor were they asked to cook or scrub or clean. Added to her ignorance of all useful employment, was her sectional antagonism, her dislike of Northern people, and her open avowal of it.

As he jogged along, Casper could see but one solution for the problem of Lucy Lattimer. She was in urgent need of a husband to love and care for her, and he knew of a likely candidate for the position; in fact, two candidates. For Major Foster was undoubtedly smitten, and he could be depended upon to take unfair advantage of his official position.

The Indian attack and the discovery of the burned wagon train caused the major to be amenable to the suggestion of Casper that his "household" cavalry be utilied as scouts.

Two horsemen were sent out to ride at a distance of half a mile on either flank of the column, while two others followed at the same distance in the rear, and Buffalo Charlie rode as usual far ahead of the troops. In this manner, on the open plain, they were on guard against a surprise attack from any direction. However, the days passed, and the troops drew nearer to Fort Laramie, without further sight of the savages, until Casper concluded that Chief John Big Mountain had been on a raid east of Laramie and had retreated with the loot of several wagon trains and his wounded to the main band commanded by Red Cloud, who was operating farther along in the Powder River country.

It was a very weary little army which marched into Laramie and was welcomed by the brigadier general in command of the most important post on the trail.

LARAMIE, the most famous of all the frontier posts and a position of the greatest strategical importance, was situated upon the Laramie fork of the Platte River. Originally it was a fur trading post, founded in 1834 by a French-Canadian trapper, named William Sublette, and at first it had been called Fort Clark. Its site was changed about ten years later to a position a mile farther up the Laramie River, the name of the river being chosen as the title of the fort. There had been a French fur trader named La Ramie, who operated in that country before 1820, and who had given his name to the river and to a mountain not far away.

At Laramie the plains had given place to rolling country, with the Black Hills in the distant background, and the fort stood in a long, narrow valley, inclosed by grassy hills. Originally it had been an adobe stockade, about two hundred feet square, its houses also being of adobe, with dirt roofs, built against the inside of the protecting wall, which was about fifteen feet high, and inhabited by a swarm of French, Mexicans, friendly Indians, and Americans. It had watch towers, and its gates were defended by two brass cannon. But in 1866 the old structure had given place to a neat army post, which consisted of a cluster of buildings, barracks, officers' quarters, a settlers' store, shops, and storehouses, without a protecting wall. A battery of field guns and a strong garrison afforded ample protection against any hostile Indians.

It was considered highly unlikely that the Indians would attack as powerful a post as Laramie, and history demonstrated that the confidence of the army was well founded.

Major Foster informed Casper that he would rest three days at the fort, and the lieutenant did not feel justified in protesting, for his men were dog-weary; many of them had worn their shoes to tatters, and their bare soles were upon the ground. Quarters were assigned the visiting officers, and the men were made comfortable in the barracks, while Lucy gratefully accepted the invitation of one of the officers' wives to occupy a room in her house until she was ready to continue her journey.

There was a military band at the fort which played night and morning; there were good things to eat—food properly cooked and of more variety than was possible to prepare on the march, and many of the comforts of civilization in the wilderness. Hunters brought in buffalo and deer steaks; housewives, with real cookstoves, served delicious meals, and the garrison was large enough to permit of a limited social life.

Major Foster's report of the Indian attack was received with astonishment, as the trail east of Laramie was supposed to be comparatively safe, and the activities of a large body of Indians in that quarter indicated that more serious events were probably occurring to the westward.

There were half a dozen small forts located along the Bozeman Trail, and some of these had already appealed for reënforcements because of lowering war clouds. The general commanding Laramie laughingly informed Major Foster that, if he wished to get his command to Appleby, he had better take his troops by Fort Reno and Fort Phil Kearney in the dead of night, as their commanders would surely gobble them up if they ventured within the walls.

Lucy Lattimer sank gratefully into the depths of a feather bed that night, the first time she had slept in a comfortable bed since leaving Omaha, months before, and in less than five minutes she was fathoms deep in slumber.

This generation, which rides in motorcars equipped with ingeniously contrived shock absorbers, has no conception of the harrowing experiences of those who rode in prairie schooners. These ponderous wagons had advanced in no manner from the carts of the Greeks and the Romans, for the bodies rested flat upon the axles, and every bump and jolt of the rough trail hit the spine of the person who occupied the springless seat, with no other cushion than a folded blanket. The wagons, being constructed for endurance rather than comfort, dispensed with the springs with which the light wagons and carriages of the period

were equipped, and they rumbled over trails which would ruin the sturdiest automobile of the present time.

Although Lucy had become somewhat accustomed to this mode of travel, she was just as soft and gentle as any girl of 1927 and every muscle of her body was lame, every nerve strained and wracked, and the base of her spine was almost without feeling. It is probably true that our ancestors, had they been gifted with ability to read the future, so that they could have learned how ingeniously their descendants would be protected against discomfort of every sort, they might not have been able to endure the hardships of their epoch.

Having no such information, they submitted to the primitive methods of transportation, because they could not concieve of better modes, just as our descendants, being wafted from place to place by airplanes, or, perhaps, being delivered instantaneously by some refinement of pneumatic tubes, will think pitifully of us who require four or five days to traverse the American continent on poky trains and six days to cross the Atlantic on slow-moving ocean liners, although we assume that we are especially favored in the way of rapid and comfortable transit.

A night's sleep in a soft bed did wonders for the girl's tired bones and aching muscles, and the golden notes of the bugle, which awakened the garrison, fell sweetly upon her ears. The whole ghastly experience of the past six or eight weeks seemed to her to have been a horrible dream, as she lay between sleeping and waking. It could not be possible that she, Lucy Lattimer, of Meredith, Alabama, had lost her dear father in a saloon brawl, had seen him buried in a cheap wooden box, had crossed plains and forded rivers, had passed through an attack of wild Indians, and was now an orphan and a waif, with no home, no friends, and many hundreds of miles of fiend-ridden country between her and the only relative she had in the world. It was just a bad dream from which the bugle had awakened her, and she smiled and sank again into slumber, from which she was roused by the colored maid of her hostess, bringing in her breakfast upon a tray and setting it upon a chair beside her bed.

THEN she knew it was all true, and shrank from arising and going on with a life which had become so horrible that she wished she might die now, while she was comfortable. Though there are natives of South Sea islands who are said to have the gift of departing this life, whenever they make up their minds to it, by the simple process of lying down, closing their eyes, and willing their deaths, young and blooming American girls in perfect health cannot end it all by wishing. So, presently, Lucy was sitting up in bed and eating the bacon and eggs and drinking the hot coffee and enjoying the meal hugely, and deciding there were a few things left in life that offered some interest.

For example, there was Lieutenant Casper Molton, who, if she were not mistaken, was either deeply in love with her, or very soon would be, and there was Major Walter Foster, whose interest in her was equally evident.

After she had reconciled herself to traveling with a parcel of Yankee soldiers—and the reconciliation came with the Indian attack and the discovery of the burned wagon train—she had thawed somewhat in her manner toward the gallant major, partly in appreciation of his zeal to be of service to her, partly because she was naturally sweet of disposition and it was hard for a Southern girl to be rude to an attentive man. Perhaps, in the back of her pretty head, she may have had some notion of revenging the wrongs of the South in a certain measure by breaking a few Northern hearts, and, in order to perform such a feat, it was necessary to offer a certain amount of preliminary encouragement to the destined victims. Lieutenant Jones had made no advances, but she knew that Casper Molton would be at her side if he were not continuously ranked out by Major Foster. It would be an easy matter to break Casper's heart, for he wore it in plain sight on his sleeve; but the major's was a

tougher organ and injuring it required a finesse which interested a girl who had been a professional heartbreaker in happier times.

Despite her forlorn situation, it had never once occurred to Lucy that marriage with the major would be a solution of her difficulty, for her distaste for Yankees was strong as ever. It was a distraction to flirt with him a little—nothing more.

Her feeling toward Molton was of a different quality than what the major awakened in her, for she had liked him from the moment she set eyes on him in Julesburg, and she had actually thrilled when she recognized him with the troops who overtook her at Horse Creek. Had he been from the South, an ex-Confederate, in the same lamentable condition as herself, she might have allowed herself to fall in love with him after a very few meetings; but Casper also was one of her enemies; he wore the conqueror's uniform, and he was born and bred a Yankee; so she told herself that he was the least intolerable of the men with whom she was forced to travel. Nevertheless, her eyes followed him upon the march or in the camp, as he rode his horse like a cavalier of the South, or busied himself with his duties in the encampment. Even when she chattered with the major, she observed what Casper Molton was about.

As Lucy finished her breakfast, she reflected that it would be weeks before she must shift for herself, and in the meantime there would be no harm in diverting herself with the two officers. She regretted that she had no pretty dresses to put on, now that she was among other women; and, rising, she opened the chest which Anthony had brought up from her wagon, and laid out upon the bed the few costumes which remained to her.

They were not such as would delight a young and pretty girl, for times had been hard in Alabama during the last years of the war. There had been no money to replenish feminine wardrobes, and all three of her dresses were five or six years old, with the evidence of age in plain sight. After a time, she donned the least shabby, a blue street costume which needed a crinoline to balloon its ample skirt. And the crinoline was forthcoming, a folding affair which she fitted expertly, then donned the dress. She sighed, then flew to a mirror and worked for a quarter of an hour upon her lovely yellow hair. She had no powder or patches or paint or rouge to aid her toilet. She shook her head to see dark circles under her lovely eyes, and she had grown thin; but it was a very lovely face which regarded her gravely from the mirror. Presently her appreciation of that fact caused her to smile, and the reflection smiled back, exhibiting two dimples, one in her left cheek, the other in her chin, and the most perfect little teeth imaginable. With a shrug which meant, "I'll pass," she left her chamber and descended to the parlor of her hostess, who sat by the window, sewing upon a man's shirt.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARMY WOMEN.

HER hostess, Mrs. Captain Phillips, gave an exclamation of delight when she saw the young girl in the doorway, dropped her sewing, and came to her with both hands extended.

"Why, you beautiful child," she said. "I never dreamed you were so lovely when you came to us last night. But you are much too grand for us simple folks."

Lucy could not resist a woman who was so warmly friendly and whose admiration was evident, and she took the extended hands in her own little ones.

"It was so sweet of you to take in a homeless wanderer," she said. "You don't know how I loved sleeping in a real bed, and this little gown is nearly five years old."

"Come sit down and let me look at you. Tell me about your journey. It was dreadful, I know, because I made it myself a year ago."

"I think it is so brave of you to live away out here among the Indians," said Lucy. "Aren't you ever afraid?"

Mrs. Phillips smiled. "Always, my dear, though it is silly when we have so

many soldiers to guard us. A good many officers' wives remain East when their husbands go on Indian service, but there are six or eight women here, and we try to make the best of things. Tell me what they are wearing in St. Louis and Omaha?"

And for half an hour Lucy was occupied in telling her that hoop skirts were getting smaller, that the style of dressing hair was becoming more ornate, and what other important information she had picked up on that part of her journey which led through civilized places.

"My husband cannot understand how I suffer not knowing what is the mode," declared Mrs. Phillips. "I subscribe to the *Lady's World*, but not a copy has come through for six or seven months. They say that the Empress Eugénie appeared at court last year without a crinoline, but with a lump in the back, called a bustle. It seems ridiculous to me."

"It's true," smiled Lucy. "The new style is not being taken up, though. Queen Victoria says she will not adopt it. We are all so poor in the South that we cannot afford to follow French styles."

"You are from the South? It must have been dreadful for you during the war, but now, of course, everything is all right," said Mrs. Phillips, who came from Ohio.

Lucy bridled, then shrugged her shoulders. Why resent what was well meant?

"We consider everything all wrong," she said, "but I don't suppose you could understand that. I certainly never expected to find white ladies away out here."

"We follow our men when we can, though I am glad I did not have to go to those horrible forts on the Bozeman Trail, which were established a few months ago. They are nothing but little wooden blockhouses, and the Indians set them on fire with flaming arrows. Still, if Captain Phillips was ordered to Fort Reno or Phil Kearney, I suppose I would go with him."

"Have you been married very long?"

"Seven years, but for nearly four we were separated. He was with Grant."

Lucy nodded comprehendingly, and then she realized that Mrs. Phillips was not middle-aged, though care and worry had given her wrinkles around the eyes, and there was gray in her hair—a sweet, plain little woman, dowdily dressed, and risking Indian tortures to be with her husband in the wilderness.

"I suppose you Northern women suffered too because of the war," she said gently. "We didn't think much about it down South. Have you any children?"

"No," said Mrs. Phillips, "not now. I had a little girl, but a few months ago she was taken sick. The doctor was away with a column of cavalry, and, because there was no one who knew what to do, she died."

Tears rolled down the little woman's cheeks. In a second Lucy had her in her arms, and her keen imagination visualized the dreadful situation—a dying child who might have been saved, the army surgeon on the war path, no doctor for hundreds of miles, and a poor mother railing against fate.

In the afternoon Lucy met the other army women, simple people like Mrs. Phillips, patient, cheerful, and acquiescent, if not contented with their cheated lives. It is easy to hate those one does not know, but hard to hold resentment against kindly, wholesome persons who have only good will toward you. Lucy had never met a Yankee in her life until she started West with her father; then she had seen them only at a distance and impersonally. Actually she had not come into personal contact with them until Julesburg, and she had to admit that the citizens of that metropolis were not representative. On the march she had observed the soldiers, and in their dusty blue uniforms she had to confess that she could not tell which were Northerners and which Southerners, though she considered the ex-Confederates as horrible examples of their kind.

Major Foster and Lieutenants Molton and Jones were gentlemen—not bloodthirsty individuals. Now she sat among these women, and she told herself she might have been back in Meredith at a sewing circle; for their appearance, their views, and their attitudes were exactly the same as those of her own people, although their accents were harsher.

And these ladies admired her so frankly and honestly that she could not help liking them. Her afternoon with them did more than anything else to blow away her prejudices.

IN the evening she met Captain Phillips, a man of about thirty-five, with a brown, rather matted beard, but with a mild and kindly eye. He questioned her about her destination and was horrified to find she expected to go to Virginia City over the Bozeman Trail.

"It's impassable for all but the military," he declared. "At least a dozen wagon trains have been destroyed and fully as many convoys. No freight is going through, and we are turning emigrants back over the Oregon Trail, which is none too safe. You are taking big risks accompanying Major Foster's detachment, because, if the Indians have designs on Fort Appleby, they will do their best to keep reënforcements from getting through. However, if you do go with them to Appleby, you must remain there until the trouble is settled, or until some very strong party reaches the fort en route to Virginia City."

"Don't terrify the child," said Mrs. Phillips. "Of course, she won't leave Appleby. Major Foster will see to that. He is to be in command of the fort, you know."

Lucy considered this seriously. Would Foster dare to detain her against her will? She didn't think he would dare, but he might. Then the arrival of Lieutenant Molton put an end to her cogitations. Casper entered diffidently, none too sure of his welcome, but he had put on his best service uniform, brushed his boots, slicked his hair, and wore such an eager expression that Mrs. Phillips looked significantly at her husband, and the pair retired to the dining room, leaving the parlor to the young people, Casper and Lucy.

"Am I to understand that you came to see me?" asked Lucy as gravely as though she were not glad to see him.

"Why—I just dropped in to see how you were."

"I am very well, thank you."

"Oh!" said the officer. "I'm glad."

"I do not remember asking you to call on me, if this is a social call."

"No, miss, you didn't," he said in great distress, standing before her like a schoolboy confronting his teacher.

"In my part of the country gentlemen do not call upon ladies uninvited."

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said, with a face like fire, then bowed and made as though to leave.

"But, since you are here, you may as well sit down," Lucy said, with a mocking smile.

He seated himself clumsily, started to cross his legs, then remembered and didn't do it.

"These are lovely people who have taken me in," said Lucy. "I am discovering that certain Yankees are not so bad."

"I knew Captain Phillips in the war. I beg your pardon," he said, feeling that he had made an error in mentioning the late unpleasantness.

"I am sure he never captured a lady and carried her away on his saddle horn," she said, biting her lip, for his confusion was amusing.

"I'm sure he didn't. I wouldn't have done it, only I was afraid you'd be captured by Indians."

"I realize that, Lieutenant Molton, and I have forgiven you. You and the major had been most kind, especially the major."

Casper had brightened at the first half of her remark, but he looked downcast when Major Foster seemed to be preferred to him.

"I haven't seen very much of you during the journey," she continued, "but the major has been very considerate."

"Yes, Miss Lattimer, it was very kind of him," he said sulkily.

"Why haven't you joined us around the camp fire?" she asked. "I felt slighted, sir."

"Why, Miss Lattimer, he's a major. I can't intrude on him when he is talking to a lady. It isn't done in the army."

"Is the major a very strict disciplinarian?"

"He tries to be," Casper replied, with a slight smile.

"And what does he propose to do

about your action in coming after me at Horse Creek?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Lieutenant Jones said you would be court-martialed at Appleby."

"We aren't there yet," said Casper grimly.

There was silence for a moment; the girl's eyes were kind, but the lieutenant's eyes were fixed upon the toe of his right boot.

"Tell me something about yourself. You are a university man, I presume?"

"Oh, no, miss," he said with a rueful laugh. "I'm just a common Kansas farm boy. Everything I know I learned for myself. I don't know much except about soldiering."

"But you speak like a gentleman. You are not a rustic type."

"We haven't many class distinctions in the North, like you have in the South," he told her. "Not having negroes to do the hard work, we do it ourselves, so I don't think we are gentlemen, as you understand the word. I just try to be a man. I didn't get much schooling, but I like to read, and if I have what you call good manners, it's just an accident. I don't think much about them."

"The major is a graduate of West Point, so he informs me."

"I don't doubt it. Alongside of him, I don't cut much of a figure."

"He comes of old Knickerbocker stock," she added, taking feline satisfaction in watching him squirm when she praised his rival.

"I suppose he told you that, too," he blurted. "He talks about himself a lot, doesn't he?"

LUCY considered him and marveled. The ruling class of the South were aristocrats, arrogant from soft living for generations, descendants of cavaliers, lords of great estates, full of pride of race and contemptuous of the traders of the North, as all landlords have been through the ages of those who lived by changing money or performing manual labor. Major Foster was evidently of a class in the North within speaking distance of her own, but this young man was a peasant, as he himself admitted. Yet, what right had a peasant to look like one of Prince Rupert's cavaliers—to be gallant and chivalrous and to possess a charm which was so potent?

The girl still had the regal mental attitude, though she was a penniless waif, whose only home was a covered wagon. The Lattimers of Alabama were a great family, and Casper Molton would have been a serf in another age; so she was trying to despise him, and she thought she was succeeding. While she was studying the young man, Major Foster knocked, was admitted by Mrs. Phillips, and entered the room. He lifted his eyebrows when he saw Molton, and the latter drew himself up and saluted.

"Good evening, Miss Lattimer," said Foster smoothly. "I am sorry to deprive you of your visitor, but Lieutenant Molton has reports to make out. Good night, Lieutenant Molton."

"I prefer to dismiss my own visitors, Major Foster," said Lucy sharply. "And, as I have things to do in my chamber, I must ask you both to excuse me."

Leaving the senior officer with his mouth open, the girl swept out of the room and ran swiftly up the front stairs, whereupon Foster turned upon the lieutenant, with every intention of revenging himself upon the man who had witnessed his humiliation.

"You are not needed here, Lieutenant Molton," he said in cold anger.

"Neither, it appears, are you," replied Casper, a laugh in his eye.

"I am growing very tired of your insolence."

"Since we are man to man, and there are not witnesses present," said Casper, "it gives me great pleasure to tell you to go to hell."

The entrance of the Phillips family prevented further acrimony, and Major Foster tried to save his face by seating himself for a visit with them, while Casper said good night and left the house.

As he could not read the girl's mind, he had no notion that his honest admission of his humble origin had damaged him with her. He departed joyfully because he supposed that she preferred him to the major. The truth was that Lucy was angry with him for being a Kansas

clod, as she termed him to herself, and her anger had turned on the major who arrived most opportunely, and she was also indignant with herself because she was unable to despise the peasant boy as he deserved to be despised.

Of course, it seems ridiculous that one American should take such an attitude toward another, since we are all born free and equal, and the caste system was abolished by the Declaration of Independence, just as drinking was eliminated by the Eighteenth Amendment; but the point of view of Lucy Lattimer did not perish with the '60s. There are in this country at present thousands of families who consider themselves of different clay from the rest of us, with less reason than had the Lattimers of Alabama. All that irks them is that they cannot convince the remainder of us that they are justified in their assumption.

It would have amused Casper rather more than it would have exasperated him, if he had known Lucy's reaction to the information he had given her regarding his origin and upbringing, for he had never given any consideration to the notion that there might be fellow Americans of different clay than himself. While he was willing to fall down and worship the exquisite little creature, because of her loveliness and her audacity, he didn't have any more respect for her ancestors than he had for his own. Like Lincoln, he didn't know who his grandfather had been, and he didn't think it mattered, and he was not aware that there were families in America so foolish as to take pride in the knowledge that the original ancestor had ridden a horse with William the Conqueror, instead of wielding a pike on foot, with the Saxon king, Harold.

HE knew that the Southern gentry had affected to despise Northern soldiers because they didn't own large estates and hold slaves; but from personal experience he could state that their pride of race didn't make them fight any better than the shopkeepers and dirt farmers. And he would have laughed in Lucy's face and considered her a fool, if she had told him that he was not her social equal. To him she was a poor little girl who needed help, which he intended to give her, and she was so beautiful and so courageous that he was completely captivated by her. To him the Lattimers of Meridith, Alabama, didn't mean a thing, and there was no reason in the world why she should not change her name to Molton, if she happened to love him as he knew he loved her.

Major Foster, on the other hand, would have understood and sympathized with Lucy's social views, for he came of a family in New York which esteemed itself highly, and he had plenty of respect for the old families of the South. In Lucy he had recognized birth and breeding as well as pulchritude, and while he had begun by assuming her to be an unusually pretty emigrant girl, who might afford him some amusement, he had talked with her enough to realize that she was as good as a Foster, and to shake his old determination to choose a rich woman when he was ready to settle down and marry. She charmed and fascinated him. Understanding her manner of training, he did not resent her rather cavalier treatment of him, as he would have done had a typical traveler in a covered wagon snubbed him as Lucy had done on numerous occasions. His taste for her society was only whetted by her refusal to permit him to enjoy it, and he was rapidly falling as much in love with her as a man so self-satisfied could fall in love.

A West Pointer, himself, he had the West Pointer's disdain for commissioned officers like Casper Molton, who had been enlisted men, and carried his disdain so far as to include West Pointers who were not men of what he considered good families. Walter Foster believed that the English army, which commissioned as officers only men of the gentle class, was properly organized; but, not being an Englishman, he had to take the American army as he found it, and curb his preferences.

He had just been told to go to hell by a rawboned Western lieutenant, and he had to take it because there were no witnesses. But he charged it up with

the other annoyances which Casper had caused him, and he promised himself to send Molton back to the farm, a cashiered officer, at the earliest opportunity.

On the third day the detachment marched out of Fort Laramie. Casper had supplied shoes from the quartermaster's wagons to those men who had marched the soles off their boots; but he had no spare uniforms, and the troops were no longer a very presentable body of men. The old army uniform was loose fitting and sloppy at its best. The jackets rarely fitted, the trousers were wide. Puttees had not come into being at this period, and the result was that the light-blue pants of the men were always dirty and dusty at the bottom, and often ragged and even fringed at the bottoms.

As they were leaving the region of the plains for rolling country, with occasional patches of woods, abounding in gulches and gullies in which hostiles might easily conceal themselves, the troops now moved forward much more cautiously. There was a vanguard and a rear guard, with far-flung flankers, and Buffalo Charlie began to take his part of the job seriously. It was no longer level marching, and they could not cover ground so rapidly. There were frequently small streams to be forded, which slowed up the procession.

At Laramie they found a train of six wagons waiting for an escort up the Bozeman Trail, and in this train were four women and half a dozen children, so that Lucy was no longer the only girl among two hundred men and more. However, the emigrants were not of the type to interest her, nor had the women anything about them to attract her, for they were ignorant, almost illiterate, prairie folks, bound for the gold fields.

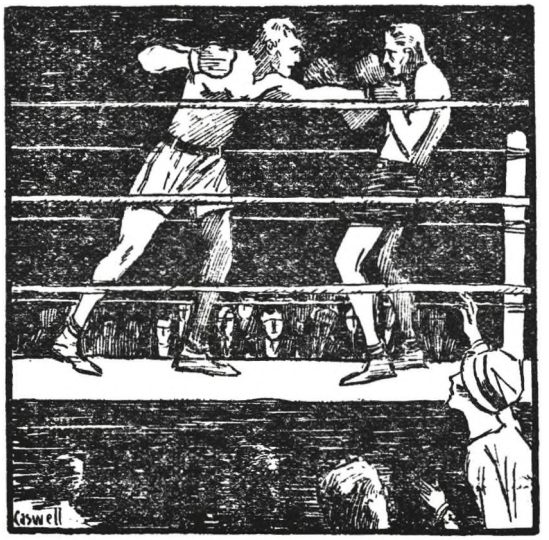
From Fort Laramie to Fort Reno over the trail was a distance of one hundred and sixty-nine miles, an easy four-hour trip by train, but for marching men a journey of a fortnight, and the longest stretch upon the entire route between army posts. It was no longer a wide, hard-beaten track, for now the Oregon Trail passed to the southward. It crossed the Powder River, the heart of the Indian country, and the scene of severe fighting before and after the events which are being recorded here.

If Red Cloud proposed to invest the northern forts, it would be excellent strategy for him to swoop down upon this detachment before it reached Reno —certainly, before it arrived at Fort Phil Kearney, sixty-nine miles beyond Fort Reno. A brush, probably a pitched battle, seemed to be inevitable in the mind of Casper Molton, and Major Foster agreed with him.

To be continued in the next issue of THE POPULAR, *on the news stands July 7th.*

SAYS WHICH?

TRY this on your radio: "A bonzor sheila and a linkum bloke got stoushed by the push before the johns mooched along. It was a fair cow." That is an example of English "as she is spoke," in Australia, according to an authority. A member of the labor commission from that continent, during a recent visit at Niagara Falls, sprang that nifty for the benefit of newspaper men. He had probably heard somewhere that American slang is the most graphic in the world and, stirred by his patriotism, offered an Australian example in evidence of the contrary. That is the way, he told his audience, a news story would be described in his country. One of his alert listeners translated it into Americanese: "A knock-out sketch of a hot baby and an ace-high sport got beat up by some tough eggs before the cops woke up. It was a dirty deal." Perhaps it would be helpful to include here another version that was given: "A fine girl and a nice boy were attacked by ruffians and severely beaten before the policemen arrived on the scene. It was an outrage."



"Shuffling Sandy"

By Captain A. P. Corcoran

Author of "The Hound of the Barrys," Etc.

The belief that love and prize fighting will not mix, amounted almost to an axiom in "Sandy" McLeod's training camp. And certainly, to judge from what Sandy risked, merely by falling in love, the axiom was quite justified.

WHEN "Sandy" McLeod slipped back to his corner at the end of the fourth round, the first question he put to his chief second and trainer was:

"Who's the old guy down there with the alfalfa and the girl? On the aisle to the left?"

Tom Daly, wielding a deft sponge, merely glared at the boxer, without the least attempt to turn his head in the direction indicated.

"Why'n't ye kill him in that round?" he demanded angrily.

Sandy, returning the look with interest, retorted:

"Do I have to climb out of this ring and find some one with intelligence enough to answer me, or could you maybe rustle some for once?"

Now, Sandy's ring prowess was popularly and properly accredited to his capacity for controlling his emotions. Moreover, his temper, once aroused, was hot as his hair and almost as hard to damp down. Irritating him in the midst of a battle for the right to meet the world's middleweight champion, did not, therefore, strike Tom as a particularly profitable pastime just at this moment. Reluctantly, then, if with a certain show of alacrity, he stayed his sponge and pushed a towel flapper out of his way.

"Third row from the ringside," prompted Sandy, aiding him in his search for the desired object.

"Aw! That's old 'Dynamite Joe' Reddy, you know. He blew up before you were born." Tom shifted a suspicious gaze to the face of his charge. "Say, wot ye want to know about him for?"

"Girl name of Reddy, too?" Sandy inquired, and there was something in his

tone, a certain softness, that startled his trainer.

"How should I know?" growled the latter. "What's a jane's name matter, anyway?" It was an axiom in the McLeod camp, fostered by MacAllister, the manager, and unquestioned by Sandy, that all women and their doings were "the bunk." "How should I know?" said Daly again, but there was a threat of rising temper in Sandy's eye that warned him to go warily. "Say, what's got into you?" he asked. "I guess she's the niece he totes about every time he comes up out of the Jersey swamps for fresh air. Masters she is—Peggy Masters."

"I ought to be a dentist," muttered Sandy, apropos of nothing, as he rose to the summons of the bell announcing the fifth round.

His trainer looked after him anxiously.

"God between us and all trouble!" he muttered, his habit being to revert to his native prayers, when he was puzzled. "If he falls for one of them!"

So perturbed was Tom that he forgot to watch the initial exchange of amenities for a full second, and, instead, he sought out the face of Peggy Masters. It was upturned, intent in expression, flushed to the glow of a pink hawthorn blossom. With the sensitive discernment of his race, he summed her up:

"Class! Got the looks, too." Suddenly his appreciation gave way to wrath, and he snarled: "No right to leave skirts into a box fight. Disgraceful, I calls it. Darn all dames!"

With difficulty he turned his attention to the canvas, on which at the moment enough was happening to rivet it to the end of the round.

Sandy McLeod, known to fight fans as "Shuffling Sandy," had a habit guaranteed always to throw the ignorant off their guard and to arouse the initiate to a state of considerable irritation. He always shuffled into the ring, wearing an innocuous smile and two long, loosely hanging arms.

His peculiar gait suggested an indifference to the proceedings. His smile said that, after all, they might be entertaining. His arms said nothing, until they connected. They, or rather the fists they supported, had already connected several times with various sections of the "Alabama Kid's" body, but, beyond inflicting a few bruises thereupon, had done nothing to make the colored boy thoroughly anxious. Now it seemed as if a new man faced him.

THEY had sparred for a second at the opening of the round. Sandy had flicked a light left to the face, after which they circled, Sandy maneuvering until he could see the girl. Not even he himself could have explained just why he wanted to see her face; but he did. He glanced at it quickly and thought he detected on it an encouraging smile. A bull-like rush by the Kid wiped out his own answering one. He sidestepped the rush just in time and cuffed his opponent smartly behind the ear.

"Wonder if she noticed that?" he asked himself and half turned his head.

Before he could locate her face in the blur about him, a round-arm right caught him flush on the nose and put him flat on his back, with the blood streaming from that bruised organ.

For one instant a tide of indignation, due to humiliation, swept over him, and then he recovered control. Trying to show off before a girl and getting smacked for it! Fine business—nit! He got on his feet at the count of four, but the gong stopped all hostilities before he could retrieve what he had lost.

Back in the corner, he could hear Daly saying half contemptuously, half angrily:

"Bad cess to ye, anyway! If ye'd kape yer eyes off that skirt, maybe ye could fight."

"Stop the blood and stop yer mouth, too," counseled Sandy.

While he submitted to the discreetly silent ministrations of his trainer, again he tried to see Peggy Masters. He saw her, but she was paying no attention to him, being in earnest conversation with her uncle.

After that he kept his gaze on the automatic clock. Just as the hand pointed to the minute, he pushed his seconds aside. The gong had no sooner sounded than he shuffled flat-footed across the

ring at lightning speed. The Alabama Kid was barely upright, when Sandy began to sink long-armed uppercuts left and right to the jaw. The colored man's knees started to sag, and Sandy poked a vicious right to the heart.

The Kid was counted out, thirteen seconds after the round opened.

For the first time in his professional career Sandy McLeod paid no heed to the thunderous applause echoing and re-echoing in his ears. Perfunctorily he permitted the referee to hold up his hand in token of triumph, but his interest was elsewhere. How would Peggy Masters like his performance? With something akin to panic he missed her from her seat and knew relief when he saw her already in the aisle, following her wildly excited uncle. He met her eye, and she waved a program at him. In a warm glow of delight he returned to his corner. He was still slightly dazed, when he reached his dressing room. As he submitted to the rubbing down, he was thinking:

"I know the old guy's name. Easy to find him. I'll figure out some way to meet her."

Just then the door opened to let in what looked like a torrent of admirers. Sandy waved them aside, until his gaze alighted on old Joe Reddy. Then he sat up.

"That was a fine finish, my boy," the former boxer was saying. "I had to shake your hand, and, if you'd just get a dressing gown on, there's some one else would like to shake it, too. Great fan, my little girl is."

"Sure! I'll get it on." Alertly Sandy sprang up to oblige.

He could hear Daly muttering imprecations in the name of Cromwell and Moses. MacAllister, his manager, was looking puzzled; while the seconds were smirking in some amusement. But all he heeded was the lithe figure advancing through the doorway. He was aware of a musical voice offering congratulations. He could only mutter in reply. Then, after some comments on the general surroundings of prize-fight champions, she was going. All that registered clearly in his mind was old Reddy's:

"Come and see us some time, son. We got a nice little place in the Jersey hills, where the air's good. Mac here tells me it's near where he figured on having your next training camp. Glad to see you any time."

"Thanks! Thanks!"

They were gone, and Sandy McLeod, who had never yet looked at a girl in his brief but busy life, was left standing, with an idiotic grin on his usually humorous countenance.

"What is to be must be," was Tom Daly's summing up of the situation, "as the woman said when she threw out the dish with the dirty wather."

MacAllister said nothing but looked grim.

AND, rejecting all offers of company, Sandy walked home alone. If any one had told him he'd fallen in love at first sight, he would have laughed loudly. Being a novice, he did not recognize the symptoms.

Miss Masters, as he learned on his first visit, which was paid with considerable promptitude, was a lady of considerable attainment and ambition in the musical line. Thanks to her uncle, she had received an excellent training abroad, and she was now breaking into American concert circles.

Did Mr. McLeod like music?

He swore it entranced him beyond anything, and the ease with which he endured some fugues, at first deceived her. She did not know that Sandy was just looking and not listening. It was Mr. Reddy who gave the game away. Having eaten a satisfactory supper one evening, he sat with them in the living room of the pleasant little house.

"Now, Peggy, play us something we can understand," he begged.

She obeyed, giving them some old-fashioned melodies, among them, "The Bonny Banks of Loch Lomond." This time Sandy did listen.

"Gee!" he ejaculated enthusiastically. "That's great—that sure is the real old stuff."

"You said something," grunted Reddy. "To the devil with fandangos. Give me good, plain fare, any day."

Peggy swung around on her piano

stool. Her uncle's tastes she knew, but she turned a humorous eye on Sandy.

"Why didn't ye tell me before when I bored you with Bach?" she demanded.

"With—with who?" quavered Sandy, somewhat alarmed.

But she only laughed and, returning to her task, began to play and warble, "Sigh no more, ladies. Men were deceivers ever."

He thought he had hurt her and was about to protest that never under any conceivable circumstances could she bore him. Never could she, even if she tried. Mr. Reddy, looking up from the paper he was now reading, winked at her over Sandy's head. But she ignored him.

"I believe you," she said at last, cutting short the protestations, and her voice, softly modulated, gave Sandy a new thrill.

That night, as he took leave of her on the porch, the realization suddenly flooded him that not only did he love her, but that she was not indifferent to him. He made several false starts, feeling for some way to word the thoughts whirling in his brain.

"Peggy," he blurted out at last, "you know, I've been coming here. Course, I like your uncle. He and myself have the same interests and all that. Boxers, you see. But you know, too, that I have——" He couldn't go on.

"I know," said Peggy, for she was nothing, if not direct.

And then in some unforeseen fashion they managed to get in one another's arms. Sandy McLeod was not only in love, but engaged!

"When you've won your fight, we'll tell everybody. Not before," she decided.

He agreed. He'd have agreed to anything just then. And, though he did want to broadcast the news next morning, he refrained. Tom Daly would only make trouble and spoil the dreams in which he indulged even during training hours.

MEANTIME, events were moving to a rapid climax in Sandy's ring career. Harry Wilson, the best middleweight the world had seen in many a long day, had consented through his manager to meet the climber, Alexander McLeod. Mr. Wilson liked his crown and had no intention of losing it. On the other hand, being an "honest-to-goodness" king, he would never avoid a battle with a possible usurper. The date was set at two months' distance, and the day the papers were signed, in the presence of many applauding newspaper men, who liked the spirit shown by these two scrappers, particularly that shown by Wilson, MacAllister took his charge aside and said:

"This will be no walk-over, kid. Understand? It's make or break for you, but it's make, if I know anything, provided you do your part."

"Aw, cut out the preaching," said Sandy. "I had enough of that from my old man. Did you ever know me to fall down on you?"

"I didn't, and I don't want to."

So Sandy McLeod commenced his training. Tom Daly was all for changing their plans about camping in the Jersey hills, but MacAllister did not see the necessity, and Sandy himself was indignant. So Sandy trotted about the Orange Mountains, skipped within sight of them, punched the bag with resounding whacks, which, he would like to think, could be heard in a certain home; and he did his calisthenics with such vim that even Tom was satisfied for a time.

There came a day, however, when Reddy, anxious to watch the training in progress, brought in his train Peggy Masters. Dynamite Joe, being unobservant, did not notice the glances exchanged by trainer and manager. Daly's men, however, said almost audibly:

"What did I tell you?"

MacAllister's mind was as bright as his native Scotch mountains in a mist.

"Wimmen and boxing don't gee," commented the Irishman later.

"I'll talk to her," said MacAllister, "and maybe she'll stay away."

"And get Sandy sore as a boil under your shoulder blade? Forget it."

They both decided to content themselves with comments on the inscrutable ways of a Providence that could include females in any sensible scheme of existence.

And still she came; but, confounding their expectations, she did no harm; on the contrary, never had their proposed champion shown such speed in his encounters with nimble-footed lightweights and never such violence with the heavies. Several of his partners, finding their jobs overstrenuous and being reluctant to confess it, slipped silently into the night and never reappeared.

But nothing seemed to bother Sandy. He sang, even while they rubbed him down, whistled under his showers, and spent all his spare time with Peggy and her uncle. And the more he visited them, the harder he tried his partners, until Daly himself began to protest.

"Steady, me bhoy! Steady! Ye'll overdo it," counseled his trainer one day when he was becoming too fierce even for a heavyweight.

Sandy only laughed, glancing toward a corner in which Peggy sat, flushed, excited and full of admiration. Daly's glance followed the boxer's, and he scratched his head.

"Maybe we were wrong. The dame's doing him good, I'm beginning to think. Never can tell how love works," he confided to MacAllister that evening.

"Yeh. That's the trouble," was the dour reply.

This time MacAllister was right, for trouble came in torrents—to the camp and elsewhere.

It started on an evening when Sandy and Peggy, left alone now by a discreet uncle, were discussing their plans for the future.

"I'll have a wad of dough after I win this championship," announced Sandy. "We'll take a good, long, old honeymoon —six months, maybe, and then we'll settle down around here somewhere. Won't it just be great!"

There was no answering enthusiasm in Peggy's face, however, and he looked at her uneasily, waiting for her to speak. When she did so, it was with a little laugh that jarred.

"You've forgotten my engagements for the fall," she said. "I've just got in properly with a good New York manager, and he's signed me up, as you say, in just the way I want."

"But you don't need to bother about managers now, honey. 'Tisn't as if you were going to keep on with your music after we're married. Why——"

A flush, this time of anger, not delight, had flooded Peggy's mobile features.

"My music," she announced with a touch of hauteur, "is my career, just as boxing is yours."

With the naïveté of the professional he-man who has no chart with which to guide himself in the changing currents of human relationships, Sandy replied, as he thought, with convincing logic:

"A woman's career, honey, is just in one place!"

"Don't say it!" cried Peggy so abruptly and shrilly that Sandy started. "I just couldn't bear that." At his pathetic look of bewilderment, however, she softened: "Sandy, darling, I love you. I'll always love you, but you are a bit out of date—about women, I mean."

AT her words something of Sandy's old obstinacy was aroused. Peggy spoke quickly, almost hysterically, trying to make him see her position, but he couldn't. She was a woman. She was going to be his wife, and no wife of his was going to show herself in public for the amusement of the crowd. Didn't he know the crowd ever so much better than she did?

She objected that his crowd and hers were totally different, and he countered that they were all the same. She pointed out that she was practicing an art, whereas—— She stopped at that, aware of the look on his face.

"I've got an art of my own," he said stiffly. "What d'you think I am—a man-eater? Haven't you seen me work?"

She tried to soothe him, and he softened for a time, but when, thinking he had won her over, he came back to the question of a career, he found she was as obstinate as he.

"Then it's all up," said Sandy. "All our plans." He forgot that they had been just his. "If you're going traipsing about the country all the time, how could we have a home?"

"What about you traipsing round, as you call it?"

He said that was different, which she refused to see.

"I'd better be going. It's late," muttered Sandy presently.

It was past his appointed bedtime. She let him go, and they did not even kiss at parting.

Next morning he did his road work with little heart. He ate almost no breakfast and in the gymnasium practically took a day off. There was no sting in his blows, and his partners could almost hit him at will.

"What's eating you?" called MacAllister angrily, once. "Put more pep in it, boy."

But Sandy had no pep to spare on physical processes. He was too busy mentally. His eye kept ever wandering toward the door. All morning he had persuaded himself that the trouble would blow over; that she would come to her senses during the night and would show up as usual. But, as the afternoon progressed, and there was no sign of her, he grew despondent. Literally, he didn't care who hit him, or who didn't, or whether he ever saw a glove again.

As he lay on the rubbing table, Daly, confident now from Sandy's recent performances, showed no undue alarm.

"Ye've been overdoing it, me bhoy, as I said ye were. What ye need is a couple of days off. Ye've gone stale."

Sandy agreed with him listlessly, but at the end of the lay-off he was no better than before. They eased up on his training and called in a doctor who declared him to be in perfect condition.

The fight now was only a week away.

Every day they hoped for improvement after another night's rest, but none come. They couldn't know that he spent the dark hours, turning and twisting on his bed, deciding one minute to call on Peggy next day and make up, and the next moment decided to abandon her forever. The latter resolution won always, for Sandy was no quitter in any fight. He had his pride and also his obstinacy.

Joe Reddy, coming to have a last look on the prospective champion, said to Daly:

"What's wrong, Tom? The lad don't seem eager, eh?"

Tom began to get panic-stricken himself.

"Search me, Joe. He's boxing beautifully. He's in fine trim, but he's no go at all—at all." And, making a great concession, he inquired: "By the way, where's that girl of yours? Ain't seen her around in a long while."

Dynamite, dumb as usual, merely replied:

"She's busy with her music. Every day in town now. She's having real concerts soon." He spoke with some pride, for Peggy had convinced him that she was really too occupied to visit or receive Sandy these times.

THAT night Daly and MacAllister had a conference, and the result of it was a little awkwardly arranged encounter between Daly and Peggy a few days before the fight. Trying his best to appear plausible, Daly said in his best manner:

"We don't see you around any more, lady. We miss you up at the camp."

"*You* do?" asked Peggy pointedly.

Daly blushed. He had never known how to handle "the sex," so he blurted out:

"Well, Sandy—he ain't been himself since you left off coming."

Her eyebrows shot up until they almost met her curling hair, and her eyes flashed in a way to frighten the stout Irishman.

"I should think that, if Sandy can't box without a woman looking on, he'd better take up dancing, don't you?"

And she left him cold.

"Savin' me mother—God rest her sow!! —gosh-darn all wimmen!" he cried and confessed the failure of his embassy to MacAllister, who showed no surprise.

"The newspaper boys have got onto him," he said, a little later, displaying an evening paper to the dejected Tom. "Look at that!"

Yes, it stared at them both in cold type. Shuffling Sandy, who had been showing such form in his training, had gone stale. That was their only explanation of the sudden change. Heretofore their opinions had been divided about the outcome, despite the odds that were five to four on the present title holder.

But odds were always on the title holder. They weren't so sure now but that the betting was right on all counts. The feeling grew in the next few days, but Sandy showed no interest in the columns of prize-fight stuff they showed him.

"Those wise crackers!" was all he would say. "What do they know, anyway?"

"They know you've gone to pieces, my lad," he was told.

But he didn't even show temper; a terrible sign.

They broke training before the fight and went to a city hotel. The only interest Sandy displayed now in the coming battle was a request that two ringside seats be sent to Dynamite Joe and his niece. He even inquired later whether they had been sent, and he showed a flicker of life on being assured they had.

"She'll come," Sandy tried to encourage himself. "And if she does, I'll know it's all right."

He wouldn't allow himself to believe otherwise. Hadn't she said she loved him and would always? That was the sentence which his memory kept repeating. But, until she proved it by helping him win his fight—she must know she'd spoil it by staying away—he wouldn't trust her. Meantime, he knew the heartsickening seesaw of hope and fear. It didn't help his nerves.

Sandy met Harry Wilson on the afternoon of the day of the fight, at the commission offices, when they were being weighed. It was his first encounter with the curly-headed, chubby-faced boy, and Sandy liked him instantly. Despite the difference in their outward appearance, one being rotund and the other angular, their weights were almost identical, each being a pound or so under.

"They tell me you've gone stale, Sandy," said Wilson cheerily. "Old stuff, eh?"

Sandy grinned more amiably than he had in some time.

"Gee! I'll just hate to muss up that pretty face of yours," he countered, and they both laughed.

The final editions of the evening papers that evening ran headlines which emphasized the good-fellowship of these two excellent fighters. Here was a real, old-time sight. Readers were urged to go to see it. Crowds were turned from the arena doors.

When Sandy McLeod emerged from his dressing room that night, the trepidation of his nerves had sent an unaccustomed flush to his sallow cheeks and a glow to his gray eyes. If she was there! He had inquired about the position of seats for Reddy. The ring blocked his view at first, and then he saw Dynamite Joe waving to him in encouragement, and beside him was an empty chair.

The reaction set Sandy's heart thumping. His suspense was over and his excitement. He climbed to his corner, looking glum. Straight before him he stared, until he was summoned to the center for instruction. While he listened absently to the referee, he noted that the champion was smiling.

"What's up, Sandy?" the referee asked in a whisper. "Nervous, eh? Don't get scared. I want to give 'em value for their money."

He gave no answer. Back in his corner he could hear Daly telling him by way of a spur that the odds had lengthened on Wilson. From five to four they had climbed to five to two, and you could even get three to one.

"It's the boys saying you're burned out, but you're not, me bhoy." Daly was trying to administer every form of encouragement to action.

Without heeding him, Sandy, pulling on the ropes, rubbed the soles of his shoes on the resin. All he was thinking was:

"So she's willing to let me down!"

AT the sound of the gong the eyes he had resolutely kept in order would veer to the chair. Still vacant! He shuffled as usual toward the center of the ring in long, flat-footed strides. The champion came bounding across on his toes.

They tipped gloves and fell into position. Sandy stood slightly bent forward from the waist, arms hanging loosely by his sides. Harry Wilson had adopted a Jim Jeffries crouch, with arms seesawing the air.

They circled. The champion rushed Sandy, stabbing a left to the face and getting a left to the jaw in return. Wilson rushed again and drove lefts and rights to the wind and then shot a right to the jaw. Sandy clinched and held the other's arms. The referee parted them.

The Shuffler ducked a right swing and drove one of his own to the heart. Had it been the old Sandy, with his thoughts in the right place, it would have told. Now, though it had been perfectly timed and aimed, it lacked snap.

In the interval, Daly, who had pinned his hopes on the stimulating aroma and atmosphere of the ring, showed a face livid with rage.

"Making a sucker out of yerself and all of us! It's a sad day when a man falls down on his best friends. Can't ye pull yerself together?" He was about to add the counsel given him by a certain lady in an encounter never mentioned to Sandy, but he stopped in time.

"Shut that mouth of yours, you bum harp! How should a thick hide like you know what a man's feeling?" declared Sandy, snarling in a way he had never shown before.

"I'm feeling plenty at the present minit," came the muttered comment.

MacAllister, being wise, kept away altogether from the corner. He was not usually a fatalist, but he recognized better than Daly did that here he was up against a force he did not understand. That was the trouble with love. You never knew what would happen. If he had been religious in the pagan style, he might have prayed for mercy to the goddess, Venus. As it was, all he counted on was a boxer's instinct and luck. Besides, hadn't Sandy Scottish blood in him? Better let the boy alone.

The second and third rounds were but a repetition of the first. Sandy was on the receiving end all the time, but in such style did he box, apparently automatically, that, at least, he took most of the sting out of the champion's blows.

In the fourth he seemed to snap out of himself, as Daly had so monotonously advised in intervals. Then he gave Harry Wilson a good shellacking.

The champion rushed, but this time Sandy slid aside, brought his left down on the nape of the neck, and, as his antagonist fell, shot a right up flush on the nose.

"Ain't that me own bhoy?" chirped Daly, delighted. "Kape it up, and he's easy picking."

But Sandy did not keep it up. That rally, had they but known it, was due to a sudden spurt of hatred against Miss Peggy Masters. "Damn her!" That's what Sandy had been saying to himself. "Pretending she loved me, and then throwing me over for a lot of noise!"

The sight of the still empty chair, in the interval, damped his wrath. If she didn't love, what did life matter in the future?

In the fifth and sixth he gave a repetition performance of the first three rounds, drawing hoots from the crowd and counsel from his friends. His left eye was half closed now, his lips puffed, and there were several red patches over his kidneys.

"You've got him," said Harry Wilson's seconds. "That fourth round was his one and only effort. He ain't got the stuff they thought he had."

Meantime, the fans were crying loudly for action. They used every epithet they could think of, not omitting the usual howls of "Fake!" and "Throw 'em out!" *Clap! Clap!* went their concerted palms, too. They had not come for such tame entertainment.

Back in his corner, Sandy was unwilling to lose and yet unable to get started again. He looked to Dynamite Joe as to a life belt. Maybe, the sight even of her nearest relation would put pep in him, but the old man merely shook his head from side to side, as one who would say: "I'm disappointed in you, lad."

At his wit's end, MacAllister thought threats might help, and he announced:

"I quit as your manager right now."

Daly, sorry for the boy now, added his quota:

"Sure, ye could murther him, if ye wanted to. What's come over ye?"

Not one of them helped Sandy. What did he care if MacAllister quit, or Daly cried over him? If Reddy had shown that——

At the commencement of the seventh round the referee stepped between the fighters and warned Sandy. He must show some sign of life or be thrown out. The house cheered itself hoarse, and the Shuffler glared about him. Fight, must he? He would do as he damned well pleased. Then some one friendly called out a word of cheer, and his answer to this was a sincere but feeble one. He flicked a few lefts to the face and hit the champion several times with a right. Wilson rushed him to the ropes near his own corner and began playing both arms to the body. Sandy clinched.

THE fans had become quiet for a second. They were disgusted; they wanted this false alarm to be silenced forever. They hoped Wilson would do no heed to the cheers.

And then suddenly in the hush came a soft sound, but clear as a bell:

"You tak the high road, and I'll tak——"

It went no further, but Sandy heard it and stiffened. He did not dare look around, but he did not need to. How should any one but Peggy Masters and himself know just what that song had meant to him?

With a sudden display of strength, worthy of Samson himself, Sandy McLeod lifted the champion off his feet and swung him around. He wanted to face the direction from which the voice had come. She was there! Her eyes were shining, as he had seen them the first time, and her little face upturned was flushed like a pink hawthorn blossom.

"Whip him, Sandy!" she shouted, regardless of the half-ironic, half-encouraging cheers around her. "Whip him!"

For a brief second he stood, still keeping the clinch, throbbing with the sudden reaction from his late depression. Then through his bruised lips he yelled:

"Watch me!"

The referee parted them. Wilson, puzzled by these proceedings, but alert to his business, rushed again. This time he was met with arms that worked like pistons, one to the jaw and the other to the heart. So astonished was the champion at this change of form that, taken off his guard a bit, he was found hanging to the ropes when the gong sounded.

Sandy shuffled to his corner. He paid no heed to the cheers.

"It's all right, Tom. I can lick him," he informed Daly.

"Lad, I never meant it," whispered MacAllister in his ear. "I only thought it'd stir you up. Forget them words."

"I never heard 'em," said Sandy. "Ye auld Scotchman!"

"Scotch yerself!"

They both grinned, Sandy painfully.

The eighth round satisfied even the gallery.

Wilson was a slugger who had won his championship by hard work, and he had no intention nor desire to relinquish it. This fellow might have been faking heretofore, but why? Anyway, he had some punishment coming.

He rushed in, head down and chin in. Sandy met him with a stiff left, but didn't stop him. Sandy felt jolts to the ribs, and they hurt. He feinted a left and swung a right to the temple, but got a stinger himself on the neck in return.

They stood in the center, trading blows, while the arena rang with hoarse shouts. The fickle crowd had again changed its allegiance.

"Boy, how he's been fooling us!"

"Go it, Scotch! You've got the real stuff—prewar."

"Ain't it a crime what he's doing to the champ!"

"Come on, Shuffler! Do your stuff! Shuffle him out through the ropes."

It was a kind of treatment, to which Harry Wilson, a favorite, had never been accustomed before, and he resented it bitterly. Also, he was irritated with Sandy McLeod. What kind of a fight was this, anyway? There was monkey business in it somewhere, his dulled brain told him, and it was connected with that girl he had seen between rounds. Well, there were more ways than one of using her, and he hit on one of the sort that has cost many a confiding ring king his crown.

THEY had been sparring in the center and suddenly he stepped out of range, looking toward where Peggy Masters sat. Sandy's eyes half followed his,

and then the champion pointed in her direction with his gloved hand outstretched. Startled, the Shuffler turned to look and received a crushing right on his jaw. Ten thousand hammers seemed to have hit him at once. The next thing he was aware of was a monotonous chant:

"Four! Five!"

He rolled over on his face.

"Six!" He tried to brace himself up.

"Seven!" His legs would not move.

"Eight!" He managed to reach the lower rope and began to pull himself erect.

Far off he could hear the frantic calls of his seconds, shrieking advice at him, and the thunderous roaring of the mob.

"Nine!"

Clang!

The gong had saved him, going off like a great cannon in his ear. He was being dragged to his corner. Smelling salts were thrust under his nose. They were so strong that they made his eyes water, but they cleared his brain. His legs were massaged, and the long nails of a helper dug into his spine, but they seemed to bring feeling again into his numbed body. He could swear there was more than water in that bottle they held to his mouth.

"He pulled a raw one, Sandy, me bhoy, but stall him this round. Take it aisy, and ye'll pay him out. He don't look so good himself," declared the outraged Tom Daly.

Meantime, the fans were razzing the champion. They called him, "Dirty," and advised Sandy to dig a grave for him as quickly as may be. But Sandy had no hard feelings. The rule of the ring is to protect yourself, while in it, at all costs. He had broken it.

He stalled, as advised, in the ninth round, and found himself getting fresher every minute. Once in a clinch, Wilson said:

"No hard feelings, Sandy."

"None. Good-looking trick you pulled."

The fans, though disappointed at the calmness of the two in this round, were content. There was plenty left in them yet for a real massacre.

When Shuffling Sandy came out for the tenth, he was full of steam. He kept away from Wilson's rushes and sent long-arm lefts and rights to wind and heart. The champion, who had worked hard from the opening of the battle, was tiring fast. He could feel the sting in his opponent's blows now. His ribs were hurting considerably.

Wrapping his arms about them now and keeping his chin well tucked in, he walked into Sandy, taking everything for the time on his head. He was a game fighter, and on he came now, hoping for an opening that would let him bring over his right. He crowded the other, who kept flailing away at every bit of the body visible through the arms.

The crowd were yelling for a knock-out, and even above their din Sandy could hear Tom Daly's bellow:

"Up, up, Sandy! The jaw!"

Wilson could see the black shoes of the challenger suddenly change position, the right foot being drawn back. Then he saw a wet, glistening glove start on its way to his face. He stepped back swiftly, making Sandy miss by a yard. He straightened up, and, wading in, swung an over-arm right to the Shuffler's jaw. This time the latter was too quick. He ducked the blow by bending his knees, and the threatening arm whizzed over his head.

And now, using the bent knees as leverage, Sandy McLeod heaved his body with all his remaining force, bringing both arms together with terrific impetus to right and left buttons.

Only a sledge hammer, Harry Wilson thought afterward, could have struck him with such deadly effect. He was lifted clean off the ring floor and dropped many fathoms deep in oblivion.

WHEN Peggy Masters followed her uncle into Sandy's dressing room that night, there was a hesitancy about her that made her former fiancé somewhat ashamed. Shy of him she was! And just look what he owed her! He would have said nothing there, however, but for old Joe Reddy who, despite his pleasure in the outcome of the fight, was puzzled by the whole proceeding.

"Say, what's all this about, anyway?

Singing in a ringside seat! And a girl!" He was ashamed for his family.

"Aw, gee! 'Twas nothing. Peggy was just afraid I was going to lose, as I was, until she pepped me up," explained Sandy awkwardly.

"You said something then, son," cried MacAllister and Daly together.

But Reddy was not to be put off, and, the seconds and other hangers-on expelled, Sandy consented to explain, though with hesitancy.

"I—well, I was jealous, I guess, of her career, but after her getting me the championship—well, I guess she can do anything she wants, and I don't mean maybe."

Peggy, silent, but tremulously smiling, just looked at him.

"Do the girl out of all she's been working for so long!" Old Joe began to roar indignantly.

"But I'm not," Sandy protested. "Am I, Peg?"

"No, dear. I think we'd better let you dress properly. Uncle and I will wait."

No sooner had they left than Tom Daly proceeded to double up with amusement.

"Arguing with a dame, he was! Arguing with a dame! Telling her how she'd have to live the rest of her life." He choked with laughter. "Why, ye poor simp, ye're more innocent than a babe with a bottle." And then he winked ponderously, a new idea striking him. "Give her her head, me bhoy, as you would a horse—sometimes. Ye'll find that she'll find, talking of milk bottles, there'll be stronger arguments than yours to keep her home some day."

It was with something almost venomous in his eye that Sandy retorted, already on his way to the door:

"You always did like to shoot the mouth off, yourself. Ain't you heard me say my wife does as she likes?"

"Sure I did, and sure she will," replied the other.

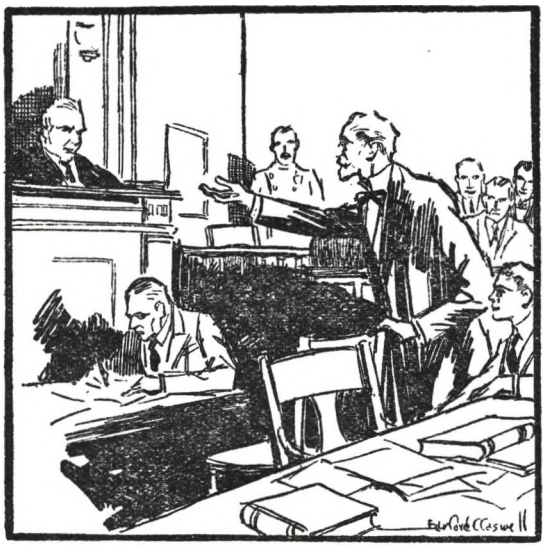
"Yeah!" said Sandy, and he was followed through the door by peals of laughter, in which even MacAllister joined.

AGE NO HANDICAP

EVERYBODY now knows that this is the age of woman's emancipation. Independence is the goal of all flappers. Everybody takes for granted that a young girl in these days of rebellious youth is determined to go her own economic way. But her maiden aunt is not far behind her flapper niece, if we can trust the statistics of the Travelers' Aid Society and the Salvation Army. The former recently pointed out that many of the runaway cases that were brought to its attention were cases of elderly people, who had forsaken the boredom and security of their own firesides.

Now the Salvation Army caps the experience of the Travelers' Aid Society with similar stories of elderly people, who are determined to make a dash for liberty. Dissatisfied with homes where they are not needed or wanted, these elderly people are bent on going out into the world again "to lead their own lives." More than fifty per cent of the population of the Salvation Army Hotel in New York, is composed of elderly women, who have deserted their former homes to live at this hostelry for forty cents a night. Those who are physically able go out to work by the day, while the more advanced in years sit about and indulge their appetite for a quiet bit of gossip, with no nagging relatives in the offing.

The flapper who would throw stones at her maiden aunt in these days had better look to her own glass house. The new woman is where you find her, regardless of the handicap of age. The new woman is just as apt to be an unwanted spinster or an outgrown grandmother as a young chit.



The Oil-field Jester

By George W. Butler

The crowd of oil speculators and hangers-on, who attended the O'Brien lawsuit at Wichita Falls courthouse, regarded the whole affair as a circus. Even those vitally concerned were not too serious; and it is safe to say that no one there ever expected the surprise that came at the end of the trial.

IT'S no libel against the town to say that Wichita Falls was still a wild and woolly place when boom oil first smeared the chaparajos of the prairie cowboys. It had grown from a wide place in the road, with a few stores and a flock of saloons, to a duly incorporated Texas city, with the coming of the Fort Worth & Denver, back in the '80s.

Theretofore, the only excuse for those rambling shacks, which littered the landscape, lay in slacking the thirst for strong drink of a heterogeneous clientele of outlaws, Indians, vagrants, road agents, fugitives from justice, and like gentry, blended with a modicum of law-abiding cattlemen, who trekked into the Falls from a parched veld, stretching back north a hundred miles into Indian Territory—governmentally dry—and south some fifty miles, until the competitive alcoholic waves of Fort Worth overcame the seductive force of its neighbor.

As a supply station and shipping point, it was important; but as a radiator of good cheer—distilled and fermented—the Falls had no peer in the Red River country. Ten-gallon hats topped barrel-sized thirsts that ambled in on their ponies from the range, every man jack of them accoutered with a brace of six-shooters, cartridge belt, lariat, tightly rolled slicker, and sloping high-heeled boots, trousers tucked therein, with a carelessness typical of the great open spaces.

They looked with disdain upon the railroaders, city folks to be endured because useful. But there were bad men among the trainmen in those days, and, after a few baptisms of fire, in which the newcomers acquitted themselves creditably, the barriers of caste were lowered, and an infiltration started which civilized the Falls. Farmers, merchants, bankers, implement men, wholesale

grocers, and all the kindred occupations that make up a community in the wake of a railroad in virgin country, soon put a new social complexion on this oasis of the plains.

The saloons did a land-office business, and the gambling joints waxed affluent, with all the easy money drifting in. It was a wide-open town, the majesty of the law reposing only in the city marshal and the county sheriff. But they "listened to reason," and the court had little to do. Barroom fights and dance-hall brawls usually settled themselves by resort to hardware, or the unlucky man who got in bad with the law beat it for parts unknown.

Little did they reck what a metamorphosis was about to be wrought by the discovery of shallow oil on a ranch north of town. Rumblings of the discovery of "black gold" furnished town gossip a few days and were then forgotten. News of the strike, however, penetrated south Texas, where well diggers knew that, if shallow oil were found, the chances for deeper stuff in paying quantity were good. A few wildcatters, graduates of Old Spindle Top and the glorious boom that was it, sauntered in to look the ground over. With no geology but a "nose for oil," some development was started, and a fair production rewarded the pioneers' effort.

IT was not until the last year of the war, however, that Wichita County made the real strike, the forerunner of the boom that set the whole world oil crazy. A farmer, Fowler by name, drilled a well on his land adjoining the sleepy little cow town of Burkburnet, fourteen miles from Wichita. It came in a gusher and was good for two thousand barrels a day.

The way that news traveled was unbelievable. Within a week the town jumped from a bare thousand to six, with the additional five made up of oil men and speculators. An oil field directly under a town, with ownerships split up into hundreds of holdings, gave the gambler and small operator the chance of a lifetime. The big companies couldn't possibly grab the field on account of the multiplicity of owners. Lots that were worth intrinsically a hundred dollars, took on values of several thousand, night after night, as the wild trading continued without a let-up.

Even the school yard playground was leased on the basis of two hundred thousand dollars an acre. Derricks shot up everywhere. Room sufficient for machinery, slush pit, and boiler constituted a "lease." One operator parked his boiler on the lessor's front porch. Drilling rigs that had been consigned to the junk pile, were shipped into the boom. Exploding "pots," as the boilers were called, became commonplace.

Under the conservation policy of the war act, the government stepped in and restricted drilling to two wells to the city block, all owners pooling their leases and dividing the production. This stopped tremendous waste, but speculation continued unabated.

Into this seething caldron of excitement came the O'Brien family, the whole "kit and caboodle" of them—four boys and the "auld" woman, the old man having been bumped off at Spindle Top, so it is said, when he was caught stealing a boiler with the steam up.

What the O'Brien boys didn't know about the oil game in general and boom fields in particular isn't worth recording. They had "roughnecked" in south Texas from the time they were able to swing a pair of pipe tongs and had qualified as full-fledged drillers before leaving their native heath. It would have been no trick at all for them to get jobs at fourteen dollars a day, running rig; but, with their knowledge of the game, and speculation rife, they decided to take a hand at dealing themselves.

"O'Brien Brothers—Oil Operators and Drilling Contractors"—a new sign on the gable of a toolhouse—informed the world they were ready for business. The mushroom companies that were organized under declarations of trust were mushroom, indeed. The organizers knew nothing about the business, save the hiring of a lawyer, to file their articles of association, and the selling of stock. The buyers of the stock asked no questions other than the location of the lease. If it were

in the town site, the stock sold in a few hours.

When it came to drilling wells, the O'Brien Brothers were there to serve. They needed no capital. The mushroom boys put the money in the bank and gave them the privilege of drawing enough to move rigs on the leases. That required some big money, as the O'Brien Brothers had no rigs. Two of them went back to south Texas and grubstaked ten owners, who were broke and couldn't move, contracting their tools at five dollars per foot, while the O'Briens had contracts for ten dollars, with liberal bonuses attached for quick competitions.

Soon they became important factors. Money flowed in from all sides and flowed out almost as easily, what with gambling, drinking, and other amusements, which the O'Briens had learned were the popular diversions for keeping money in circulation. Tom, the oldest one, whether from his years or his mental make-up, showed some ideas of good business and tucked away several thousand dollars against the day when the boom should end. And end it did, after a hectic period of some twenty months. The production of the town-lot wells fell off to a few barrels per day, and the interest of the promoters dropped proportionately.

TOM decided to dissolve the firm of O'Brien Brothers, as the other members had no money, and hard times were at hand. Jerry went to Mexico as production manager for a big company. Pat floated back to south Texas. Farrell, the youngest, remained, trading in leases and doing a "bootleg" supply business, as the selling of oil-field accessories were known outside of the regular houses.

Tom then branched out as a real producer. He bought in for a song several of the small-company abandoned wells. By cleaning out and putting them on power, he soon had a combined production of more than five hundred barrels a day. His pipe-line checks each month mounted into the thousands, and before many moons he became a very important independent producer of crude oil.

Farrell watched this progress with considerable envy and no slight enmity. He felt that the old partnership was responsible for the present prosperity of Tom, and that the dissolution of the firm was not fair to him and the other brothers. He admitted to himself that he received his share of the cash at the break-up, as well as a block of wildcat leases in Archer County, that weren't worth paying rentals on; but he still felt that he had an undivided interest in the O'Brien operations. If there was any law in the land, he decided he'd get a cut-in on Tom's business.

That's how the O'Brien feud got into the courts of Wichita County.

A few words as to the legal profession, court etiquette, and the air of comradery pervading the courthouse at this county seat, are a necessary touch of local color. There were some good lawyers in the cow country before the big fees of the oil business distorted their views as to the worth of their services. One firm displayed its prosperity by furnishing a suite of offices—an entire floor in the city's skyscraper—and, as its conception of the ultimate in luxury, it maintained a private barber shop, manicurist in attendance, and furnished all tonsorial services free to law patrons. Many a town wag waxed facetious. The choicest bon mot was the conjecture as to whether they shaved their clients before or after giving legal treatment, it being a self-evident fact, so the wise crackers said, that the clients were shaved clean when the firm got through with them.

Having had much leisure for study, these country lawyers were well grounded in legal fundamentals, and their quick assimilation of the lore of petroleum produced a bar of no mean profundity, when it came to handling the lucrative litigation the boom created. They were born fighters and archaic enough to figure that the greatest day in a lawsuit is the day in court. Round-table conferences and crafty compromises had no place in their conception of the legal profession.

Farrell's seed fell on fertile soil. Here was a suit that would stir the community, the O'Brien boys by that time being well-nigh public characters. Handy with

their fists, liberal with their money and good all-around mixers, they were also endowed with that saving grace of humor and the knack of making friends. Farrell, in particular, was the comedian of the clan. His unctuous friendliness for everybody and devil-may-care disregard for his own affairs endeared him to friend and acquaintance alike. His wild escapades amused the town and only harmed himself, so that anything Farrell attempted was endured by the populace in the belief that it would turn out a laugh, with Farrell the butt of his own joke.

And that's the way they took his lawsuit—a big joke on Tom and a one-ring circus for the community.

THEY were not far wrong on the circus surmise, either. Dignity, usually associated with court proceedings, was not here the austere god that radiates cold chills from bench and bar. The warmth and good cheer of the country-store gathering were more typical of the way these people took court day. Smoking, chatting, feet cocked up on desks and books, coats discarded, everybody making themselves at home. The removal of hats was the only unbending to the blind goddess. They were all friends come to the laundry to see the dirty linen washed. Even Tom and Farrell almost as much as spoke to one another; the few glances they exchanged showed, at least, that they had met before.

Judge Hartigan, dean of the local bar, represented Tom. Farrell's cause was in the hands of Judge Bowie. Not that either of them had been on the bench or worn the ermine, but the title of "judge" in those parts automatically attached to the lawyer on the day he got his sheepskin.

An impressive list of witnesses, mostly character, was read by the clerk, a jury was chosen after considerable squabbling, and Farrell, the star performer, placed upon the stand to make his case. Bowie had deftly coached Farrell before the trial that he must pay close attention to the questions propounded by his own lawyer in driving home forcibly the legal points involved, never intimating, of course, that the questions might lead the witness in making desired answers. One thing he cautioned him against in particular, that of pulling any funny stuff on his own lawyer. When it came time for the cross-examination, he could go as far as he liked with Judge Hartigan, the farther the better so long as the jury enjoyed it, the court countenanced it, and Hartigan's ruffled dignity permitted it. Farrell had to win that jury, law and facts being minor considerations.

Like most Texas juries, this was a hand-picked one. Barristers prided themselves on their wide acquaintance in the county and usually landed one or more venire men on the panel, who, the designing lawyer calculated, would hold a brief for his client, regardless of law and fact. Farrell's lawyer selected three such jurors, with the whispered assistance of his client, who constantly hovered over his shoulder during the examination. A fourth one was known to Farrell, but under conditions which might cause him to veer the other way. All challenges having been exhausted, the plaintiff was forced to accept him, Farrell's trepidation causing some annoyance to his lawyer.

Farrell made an affable witness, playing up to the jurors, to the exclusion of every one else. His answers were directed to them and not the interlocutor, bland smiles and knowing nods accompanying his rapid fire on direct examination. He just took that jury into his confidence and had them feeding out of his hand, so long as his own lawyer gently led him by adroit questioning. But the fireworks started when the cross-examination opened. Judge Hartigan was thoroughly annoyed by the mass of irrelevant matter which Farrell's lawyer not only introduced, despite numerous objections, but, through the instrumentality of the genial witness, had planted deeply in the minds of the jurors.

He testified under oath that no settlement had ever been made with Tom, no considerations passed between them, and that Tom had arbitrarily ended the partnership, appropriated the moneys on hand to finance his new ventures, and

had completely frozen out the other three members. The simple story was told with many a humorous thrust at Tom and his miserly tactics, the jury relishing Farrell's picturesque oil-field language and Tom's patent discomfort when some particularly witty sally brought the courtroom down with loud guffaws.

But Tom had his innings that afternoon. Farrell, naturally cheerful under any conditions, was well pleased with himself and the impression he had made on the jury; so he settled himself back in the witness chair, beaming good-naturedly at Judge Hartigan, as he blusteringly moved into the fray.

"Farrell, do you know what your reputation in this community is as to truth and veracity?" was the opening question.

The witness figured rapidly that his reputation with the jury meant more than the community, and Farrell complacently replied:

"Not so good, I guess, judge."

"Don't you know that it is the worst in Wichita County?"

"Yes, judge, you and me both. Funny, how they look at us lawyers and oil men. Can't account for it."

WHEN order in the court had been restored, and Farrell was mildly rebuked by his honor, Judge Hartigan produced a grimy document, the legal back of which showed evidence of pocket wear and oil-field excursions. He toyed with it, close enough for Farrell to recognize its black-smeared blue wrapper, but far enough away to prevent his lawyer from getting any idea of what the instrument might be. Until introduced as an exhibit in evidence, the plaintiff's counsel could have no access to the mysterious document. Judge Bowie was plainly uneasy, Farrell having assured him repeatedly, and so testified under oath, that no written memorandum of any kind existed regarding the partnership.

Farrell's debonair complacency was slipping slightly, as Judge Hartigan fired his first broadside:

"Do you know, Farrell, that you can be sent to the penitentiary for perjury in this case, if I make you out a liar?"

Farrell allowed that that might be so, but, as he was telling the truth, "the penitentiary meant nothing in his young life." Like the boy whistling in the graveyard to keep up his courage, Farrell turned to his friends, the jurors, with the smile that followed all his witty answers. But this time the jury was intent on Judge Hartigan and the remarks he was directing to the court.

"If your honor please," drawled Hartigan, "an unpleasant duty will devolve upon me, if this case proceeds much farther—and that is to have the witness cited for contempt and bound over to the grand jury for perjury. I hold in my hand, and desire to offer it in evidence in this case, a complete assignment of all interests owned or possessed by Farrell O'Brien to Thomas O'Brien, duly acknowledged before a notary public and for valid considerations. In fact, the assignment is drawn on statutory form for transferring oil and gas leases, and the very claim which this plaintiff sets up for an interest in my client's business, is stated in the instrument as the principal consideration for the transfer. The assignment covers various oil leases in Archer County and was given by my client to the plaintiff to prevent the very thing that is happening in this court today. In the face of this outrageous perjury, I feel that the court should enter an order for the arrest of Farrell O'Brien. I offer the instrument as defendant's Exhibit A."

Farrell slumped in the witness chair. Gone were his smile and serenity. The courtroom was hushed; only the shuffling of feet and that indefinable noise of craning necks and intense bodies adjusting themselves for a dramatic climax could be heard above the clock's ticking.

Judge Bowie rose from the table, masking his surprise in the stereotyped appeal to the bench:

"If it please your honor, I should like to examine that exhibit before proceeding farther."

Bowie glanced at the form and then riveted his eyes on the closing paragraph and the notary's seal and signature. Like a spent runner taking second wind, he approached the bar, waving the ominous document before the court.

"If your honor please, I believe, without casting aspersions on my learned colleague, that an infamous fraud is being perpetrated upon this honorable court and my client."

RUNNING his disengaged hand through his hair and holding up the strange paper, Bowie strode across the forum, sparks shooting from his snapping eyes, as he surveyed the crowd, anticipating the dramatic import of the announcement he was about to make. Even Farrell moved up half a hitch, taking courage from Bowie's mood.

"This instrument offered in evidence has been tampered with. It's a forgery! The assignment is on the regular printed form used in transferring eighty-eight commercial leases, but the last three lines which have been written in on a typewriter, were not there when my client signed in the corner in the space marked "accepted."

By this time Farrell was completely aroused and restored. He hung over the railing, entranced by the fight his lawyer was making and the unexpected life line that could save him from the penitentiary. He realized now what Bowie meant when he adjured him to pay strict attention to his lawyer's remarks to the court, when a trying situation arises, and to figure his moves from the tracer bullets fired at the defense.

"We do not deny," continued Bowie, addressing the entire room in his best voice, "that the defendant executed an assignment to some worthless leases in Archer County; that he unloaded them on my client to rid himself of the rentals; but we stoutly deny that the typewritten paragraph was in the instrument at the time it was executed. That paragraph, your honor, shows the fine Italian hand of this defendant. He, or some one at his behest, has written in this clause and committed a felony. The forgery reads: 'As a further and principal consideration for the above sale and transfer, I acknowledge the complete and full assignment by Farrell O'Brien to me of all his interests of every nature in the oil and contracting business conducted under the firm name of O'Brien Brothers, his, Farrell O'Brien's, acceptance of this assignment being evidence of his consent and agreement.'

"Not only did he unload these worthless leases on his unsuspecting brother, but added forgery to the injury by using this very document to defraud him of his birthright. Such action is an invention of hell; it harks back to Cain and Abel. And there sits Cain," pointing to poor Tom, mouth wide open in astonishment at the news he was hearing.

Judge Hartigan stopped Bowie's vituperation with an objection that shook the rafters. The fight was on, the day of all days for these country lawyers. Hartigan demanded to be heard. He boomed that opposing counsel had no right to air his biblical ignorance and illegitimate theories before the jury; that legal procedure provided a way to prove the authenticity of the document, and insisted that such procedure be followed; meanwhile, noting an exception in the record to the court's ruling that Bowie was within his rights in making the forgery allegation.

"You may continue your cross-examination of the plaintiff," said Bowie, as he seated himself and glared at Farrell. But the old Farrell was up and coming when Judge Hartigan determinedly tore into him again.

He denied categorically and, unequivocally that the typewritten paragraph was in the assignment when he signed on the "accepted" line. In desperation and disgust, Hartigan dismissed him. Bowie smilingly stated that no redirect examination was necessary.

Hartigan called the notary public who had taken the acknowledgment. While asking the usual perfunctory questions as to name, occupation, et cetera, a little colloquy between Bowie and Farrell was conducted in whispers.

"If you ever get me in a hole like this again, I'll kill you!" panted Bowie, his hand to his client's ear. "Why didn't you tell me about this release?"

"The damn stuff's no good, and I lost the paper. Must have left it in the office, and Tom found it. What's the difference? It's a good fight. Maybe I'm a poor witness in following my lawyer,"

was all the satisfaction Farrell gave him, as he winked at one of his jury pals.

Hartigan was carefully leading the notary over the ground to establish the authenticity of the acknowledgment. The witness testified that Farrell and Tom were present, and that Farrell had been asked the usual question as to whether he signed knowingly and of his own free will, and so forth. His record book showed the day and date, and everything was perfectly legal.

Bowie took the notary over the cross-examination. He testified that during the boom months he acknowledged over a thousand assignments on forms similar to the one in controversy.

"Now, Mr. Carnes," said Bowie, with his most ingratiating tone, "I have only one question more to ask you. But remember, please, you are testifying under oath as a member of this court, and that your veracity being beyond question, great weight will be placed on your answer by the jury. Can you truthfully swear that out of the thousands of acknowledgments you took during those exciting months of the boom, you remember minutely this transaction—that you made mental note of the typewritten paragraph in this instrument, and that you are prepared to swear that this instrument I now hand you is not only the identical instrument you acknowledged, but that it had this exact typewritten paragraph in it at the time of execution. Answer yes or no!"

"No!" was the instant reply. "I acknowledged it like I did all the rest of them—questioned the parties and saw them sign."

"That's all," said Bowie, bowing low, as he made his way to the table.

Hartigan was in a bad fix. Farrell's unsupported evidence was worth as much as Tom's evidence to the contrary—no more. The notary had been cleverly jockeyed into such a position that he could answer only as he did. The judge so had to instruct the jury in his advice as to the law. What the jury might think of the forgery, perjury allegations, Farrell's witticisms, and the day's entertainment, the verdict would reflect. The courtroom settled down for the decision.

AFTER the jury filed out, Bowie found his client in one corner, doubled up with mirth, his arms around Pat—one of Tom's witnesses—and laughing uproariously. Piqued at this unseemly hilarity, with the shadow of jail averted only by his quick thinking, Bowie was ready to do battle himself, now that the die was cast and in the hands of "twelve good men and true."

"What's all the fun?" interrupted Bowie, breaking the brotherly embrace.

"This is too good to keep, judge," gasped Farrell between breaths. "It's the best joke I've heard since Tom got his last dry hole. We're going to get a cinch verdict in our favor."

"How do you get that way? You're lucky if you're not headed for Huntsville, with the rest of the chain gang," stormed Bowie, still chafing over the snare his client's deception had unwittingly led him into.

"You remember that fourth juror we had to accept," explained Farrell. "Well, I didn't want him because I owed him ten bucks, borrowed money. So long as I remembered it, I was sure he did, too. That's why I kicked on taking him.

"My brother Pat here met him this noon during the recess and the boll-weevil told Pat he was going to square accounts with me when he got in the jury room. Pat bulled him along and told him he'd see about it before court opened. So Pat went to Tom and told him all about it.

"'Fine,' says Tom. 'Here's twenty bucks. Give it to the guy and tell him I wouldn't let the family name be besmirched by unpaid debts of honor. Tell him also where you got the money and not to believe Farrell on a stack of Bibles.'

"Pat says he didn't have the heart to say that about me, so he gave the guy ten bucks, with my compliments, stuck the other ten in his own pocket, and told the guy to hang the jury until they voted for me; that I'm a poor boy, but honest."

Bowie had to laugh, despite the aggrieved air he assumed. Bribing a juror with the defendant's money, to throw

the case to the plaintiff, and paying a debt of honor to boot, was amusing, but highly unethical.

"Let me tell you something, Farrell, and remember what I'm telling you," said the lawyer, drawing himself up with much Blackstonian dignity. "I'm an officer of this court and intend to uphold the ethics of my profession. I know nothing of your trickery. Don't think I pulled that forgery gag to save your hide from Huntsville. More than that was at stake. You very near made a fool of me before the whole town. I did it to save myself and my professional standing. Otherwise, you could rot in the pen for all of me."

"Sure, that's all right, judge," agreed Farrell. "I couldn't tell you about the settlement, or you wouldn't take my case. I made you think it was a cinch. But we're going to win, so everybody's happy. I didn't think enough of the damn paper to pay for recording. Forget it and let's be friends."

A messenger, with a sheaf of papers under his arm, beckoned to Bowie from the doorway. Bowie disappeared, and Pat and Farrell resumed their felicitations.

Shortly a bailiff tapped Farrell on the shoulder and informed him that he was wanted in the court's private chambers immediately. Contempt and perjury somehow associated themselves with court chambers, so the erstwhile affable litigant trailed the officer, with many conflicting emotions, visions of the penitentiary predominating.

Meanwhile the jury deliberated. The crowd milled around, speculating as to what the verdict would be. The majority favored Farrell; which, taken as a cross section of oil-field intelligence, augured well for him.

A half hour's anxious waiting was abruptly ended when Bowie and his client emerged from private chambers, just as the trial judge ascended the rostrum. The bailiff reported that the jury had not yet reached a verdict.

"Any motions in other causes before the court?" the judge inquired.

"If your honor please," purred Bowie, "I have a motion to make in the cause now on hearing, which may expedite proceedings."

SENSING a new trick, Hartigan was taking no chances. He bounded to the bar, prepared for anything, after the forgery revelation.

"What's the motion?" he snapped, eying Bowie suspiciously.

"That the jury be recalled and instructed by this honorable court to render a verdict in favor of your client, Thomas O'Brien. Further, that the court instruct the stenographer to turn over to my client Exhibit A, which is his property," enunciated Bowie in his most cryptic style.

"Your honor," said Hartigan, with benign condescension, evidenced by a formal bow to his adversary, "I'm inclined to believe that my versatile colleague at this bar of justice has seen a great light, and that in its reflection the crime of forgery seems more elusive and harder to prove than does that of perjury committed in open court. The so-called hell-inspired document in the hands of my colleague may possess the sanctifying grace of absolving the sin of perjury. Gladly do I yield it up in such a noble cause. If it is his wish, we'll concur in the instructions and go him one better by withdrawing our request for the arrest of his client. I now extend him the hand of professional good-fellowship and congratulate him on the lucidity of mind which his decision in this matter evidences."

It was a sweet morsel for the dean of the bar. To emit further embellished platitudes might savor of rubbing it in on a brother in distress, so Hartigan retired, confident that the silent plaudits of the courtroom were his for a cause well handled.

"Mr. Bailiff, call the jury," austerely ordered the court.

The jury filed in with that awkwardness characteristic of juries, irrespective of their mental caliber. What was in the wind they knew not, but their faces reflected their astonishment at being called from their labors.

"Gentlemen of the jury," droned the court, "an agreement has been reached

between these litigants, and you are instructed, here and now, to return a verdict in favor of the defendant, Thomas O'Brien. The verdict is accordingly returned in open court, and costs assessed against the plaintiff, Farrell O'Brien. I thank you in the name of the county for services well and truly rendered. You are discharged from further jury duty."

"One statement more, if the court please, while the jury is present," interrupted Bowie, raising his voice so that all might hear. Still suspecting trickery, Hartigan was on his feet.

"The plaintiff accepts the verdict and acknowledges receipt of Exhibit A into my hands, delivered by an officer of this court. My client is without funds to defray court costs, but I shall guarantee them, if my guarantee is acceptable to the court."

A nod from the judge was sufficient.

"Further," continued the orator, now in fine fettle, "since the jury has been deliberating, news has reached me which made it imperative that the plaintiff, my client, Mr. Farrell O'Brien, should become possessed physically of this much-mooted assignment, which I now place in his own hands."

With the showman's appreciation of stage business, Bowie paused, surveying the room of spellbound, gaping listeners, and then calmly proceeded with his startling announcement:

"The Inter-State Well, offsetting the fourteen hundred acres assigned to my client by this instrument, blew over the crown block to-day and is now making three thousand barrels of pipe-line oil. We have been offered two million dollars for our holdings."

After the pandemonium created by this astounding statement had subsided, Bowie struck a histrionic pose and proceeded to elaborate on his sensational climax:

"I say 'we,' because my client, with his customary benevolence, has invited me into the fold, so to speak, and I am one of the organizers of a new corporation to be known as O'Brien Brothers, Incorporated—the new owners of these tremendously valuable Archer County leases. They are not for sale at any price. We shall develop them ourselves.

"My client further stipulates that Thomas O'Brien, by reason of the extreme sagacity and business acumen displayed in the handling of his own personal business affairs, shall be president and general manager of the new corporation. The other brothers shall serve as directors, and the capital stock shall be split five ways.

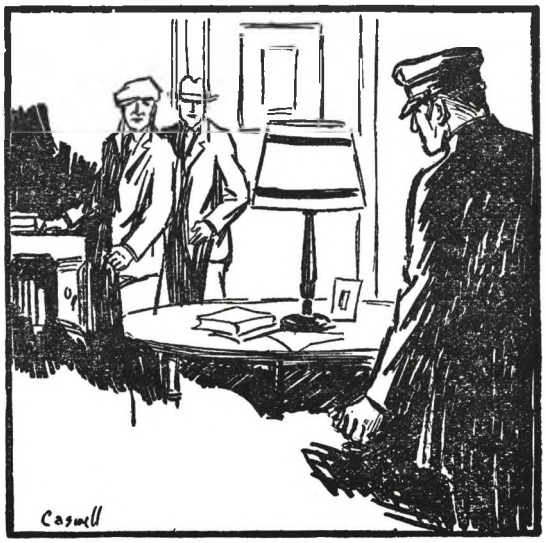
"My client still further stipulates," declaimed Bowie, turning to his late adversary, with Chesterfieldian bow and directing his oratory to that dumfounded solicitor, "that our esteemed co-laborer in this field of jurisprudence, Judge Hartigan, than whom there is no abler lawyer nor fairer warrior in the courts of this great State, shall, jointly with my firm, look after the legal interests of O'Brien Brothers, Incorporated."

What a day, what a circus, what a drama, with the final thrill still in the offing, judging from Bowie's uplifted hand for silence.

"Lastly, I wish to comment on the wonderful self-abnegating spirit of my client. It is his wish that, aside from serving as director, no title be conferred on him save that of 'The Oil-field Jester.' Gentlemen, I thank you!"

AFTER HIS OWN HEART

SCOTCH hospitality is famous. Even a peasant in the Highlands will share his one-room home with a stranger and offer his chance guest his last scone. Music-hall jokes have unduly emphasized his thrift. Here is a much more truthful account of a Scotsman's liberality. One Scot was relating to another his experience with a relative: "Aye," he said, with an eloquent sigh, "I had a fine day. I spent it wi' John. He's my wife's father, as ye ken. He's a grand man—one after my ain he'rt. As soon as I arrived he opened a fresh bottle of whisky and he flung the cork on the fire."



"The Big Feller"

By James Gordon Fraser

When Jerry Moore was fired from the force, it nearly broke Desk Sergeant Gibbons' heart. But while Jerry seemed to be going from bad to worse, he was still working to realize his two ambitions—to marry Gibbons' daughter, Annie, and to bring in "The Big Feller," a notorious criminal "master mind."

THE announcement of the dismissal of Jerry Moore, which reached Precinct 2, in the form of a special order from the commissioner's office, had about the same effect as a bomb tossed into the squad room. It came, first, to Desk Sergeant Gibbons, who read it over twice, unbelievingly, before he carried it in to Captain Steinaman, with the rest of the usual nightly communications from headquarters. It was on top of the batch of papers which he laid upon the captain's desk, and, while he said nothing, it was noticeable that he stood by, as if waiting for the precinct commander to read it, instead of returning at once to the outer office, as was his custom.

If he expected the captain to show any surprise, however, he was disappointed. His superior merely glanced at it carelessly and went on to the rest of the communications. After a moment, he looked up.

"Well, sergeant?" he asked.

"I wondered—I thought maybe—about young Moore," stammered the sergeant. "Could it be a mistake? I hadn't heard——"

"No." The captain's tone was abrupt—which was one of the reasons why old Matt Gibbons did not like him. "No; it's no mistake. I got it late this afternoon by telephone from downtown. They broke him, all right. Rule 10—clear case. He had no defense."

"But—but the charges! Who——"

"Oh, it was the new commissioner himself," interrupted the captain. "I had nothing to do with it. Seems the commissioner was prowling around the precinct last night and ran into Moore, drunk as a lord, in that alley back of Reagan's place. Took his badge and sent him home, with orders to report to him to-day. They had a hearing, but Moore couldn't deny it—didn't, at any rate."

"By the way, sergeant," he added. "I mean to tell you—better put Samuels on Post 4 to-night! No use experimenting with a new man, especially if this new commissioner is going to nose around here nights, all by himself. And pass the word to all the boys to keep an eye out for him. They'll be on their toes, anyway, when they hear what happened to Moore. You can put this order on the board."

Sergeant Gibbons took the paper which his chief passed to him, but delayed for one more word. Characteristically, it had to do with duty, rather than his personal interest, for, however greatly he was interested in the fate of young Jerry Moore, the force came first with him.

"I was thinkin', sir," he ventured, "I'd rather have Brennan or Larsen on Post 4. That's a tough beat. I ought to know. I walked it seven years. And 'Shifty'—that is, Samuels—well, I dunno how he'd stand up in a pinch."

"Put Samuels there, anyway, for the present." The captain's rejection of the suggestion was curt. The sergeant, though he was getting accustomed to the tone, stiffened involuntarily under it. His resentment was noticeable—so much so that Captain Steinaman apparently deemed it expedient to attempt amends.

"Damned shame about Moore," he commented, as the other turned away. "Great friend of yours, wasn't he? Seems to me I heard he was going around some with your girl. Nothing serious, was it? Good thing it hadn't gone farther."

Old Matt Gibbons paused with his hand upon the door. He took up the queries categorically.

"He was," he admitted. "They were keeping company. And Father Phelan was to read the banns, come Easter. But, o' course, if he ain't good enough for the force, he ain't good enough for my Annie."

It was that, in all probability, that made the veteran roundsman's heart lie heavy within him, as he went out to post on the bulletin board in the squad room the notice that he would have sworn was most unlikely of all notices to be written. It was brief, containing no more words than might be written on a visiting card:

> Patrolman Jeremiah A. Moore is hereby dishonorably dismissed from the police force, after having been found guilty, at formal hearing, of violation of Rule 10.

But it was long enough, as the man who posted it knew, to encompass the ruin of a promising career, the wrecking of a romance, and the razing of at least one pretentious air castle—upon none of which, as is well known, is there any salvage in the way of insurance.

THERE was no outward evidence of the inward perturbation which beset him in the manner of Sergeant Gibbons, as he lined up the men of the third platoon, assigned posts, read the list of stolen cars and wanted criminals, and equipped the men with such other information as was necessary before they went on duty.

He went a little farther than was necessary, perhaps, in hinting to Patrolman Samuels—"Shifty" Samuels, he was called in the squad room, where he had few friends—that any trouble on Post 4 would mean more trouble for the man who was covering it in lieu of Jerry Moore. But that was justifiable. In disliking Samuels, the sergeant was merely adopting an attitude common at the station house. Nobody liked the man—nobody, that is, but Captain Steinaman. For some reason or other, the precinct commander professed to see merit in him. But it was singularly hidden from everybody else.

It was in the long hours after the platoon had marched out and after the second platoon, which it had relieved, had marched in and reported, that the sorely worried old desk sergeant found time to give to reflection. And he found nothing in the reflection to give him comfort. Quite the contrary!

Jerry Moore "broke!" And for drunkenness on duty! It was all but incredible. Mentally the sergeant reviewed what he knew of the man who had played so sorry a part in the latest sensation at Precinct 2—always a storm center of police administration. He recalled the

day when young Moore had reported for duty—a trim, upstanding, likable figure of a man in his well-fitting new uniform. The sergeant—he was a roundsman then—had taken to him immediately and had found many opportunities to be helpful in molding out of the raw but willing recruit a finished officer who should be a credit to the force.

Utterly fearless, honest even to the extent that he paid "Dago John" for an occasional apple or banana, and thereby astounded that long-suffering individual immeasurably, young Moore had seemed to old Matt Gibbons to be the finest type of a police officer. It was this impression, once firmly grounded, that had impelled him to invite the "rookie" to his home. Nor did he disapprove when Annie, the daughter who was the apple of his eye, had developed a liking for the visitor, who came more and more frequently as time went on. Even when she had informed him blushingly that she had decided to "stay on the force" by marrying a policeman, he had seen nothing but good in the outlook.

"He'll go far, Annie," he had assured her. "He's got the makings. Any day now he'll be a roundsman. And it won't be long before he has a precinct of his own. He'll go farther than your father did, girl. Mark my words! Now that we've got the new commissioner and all, with his army ideas and Jerry having served under him in France, your lad's got the best kind of a chance. An' if he should—mind, I don't say he will, but if he should—get 'The Big Feller'—well, you'd be a captain's wife before your first comes!"

That had been Jerry Moore's great ambition—to get The Big Feller—a mysterious, half-legendary figure, like the Doctor Moriarity of "Sherlock Holmes." A hidden overlord of the underworld, a directing genius who was popularly believed to lurk somewhere in the shadow and pull the strings to which an army of puppets danced—bootleggers, gamblers, keepers of gambling dens and "blind pigs," and all the rest of the motley soldiery enlisted in the never-ending battle against the law. He was regarded as a sort of super gang leader, who planned and ordered and rewarded, or punished, according to the way his orders were carried out.

None had ever penetrated the mystery that hung about the identity of The Big Feller. So far as that goes, none had ever succeeded in establishing definitely the mere fact of his existence. Occasionally the detective bureau or the uniformed force had brought in a petty offender who could be induced, after undergoing "the third degree," to admit that The Big Feller was not entirely a myth. But who he was, where he made his headquarters, who were his associates—on these points there was silence. Once or twice, when there seemed reason to believe that some progress might be made in unraveling the tangle, mysterious killings, which the newspapers invariably attributed to "gang wars," had stopped the channels through which information was expected to flow. If the higher-ups at headquarters knew better, they kept their own counsel, but crookland and gangland well understood that The Big Feller adhered to the policy of "Dead men tell no tales."

It was this underworld colossus, a foe worthy of the finest steel, that Jerry Moore, rookie cop, had dreamed of haling to the bar of justice. Sergeant Gibbons, not unkindly, had laughed at it, a little, at first. But Jerry's enthusiasm, his confidence, and his determination had finally struck an answering spark in the older man's breast.

"Oh, I know I'm only small potatoes," Jerry would say sometimes, perhaps at the Sunday-night suppers which Annie loved to cook and serve. "But it'll be good, plain, old-fashioned persistence that'll finally land The Big Feller—that and a bit of luck. And I learned a lot of stick-to-it in the army. Somebody must know The Big Feller. He's got to have somebody that takes his orders and reports to him. The trick is to find out who. The rest'll be easy."

Undismayed by the fact that the supposedly greater brain of the detective bureau was concentrated on the same problem, to say nothing of the minds of every other ambitious man on the force, Jerry had stuck to it, on duty and off,

for months. And he had made progress, or thought he had.

"I'm sure, or almost sure, who the go-between is," he had told them, only last Sunday night. "It's Dan Reagan. Either that, or he's The Big Feller himself. I've picked up a little here and a little there until I'm almost certain of it."

"Then you'll get him, Jerry!" Annie had exclaimed, with such confident certainty that both men had laughed.

And now Jerry Moore was off the force—banished for the cardinal crime of a good officer—drunk while on duty!

No wonder Sergeant Matt Gibbons walked slowly, with lagging steps, on his way home that morning. He had a duty ahead of him. Annie must be told.

IN the days that followed, and especially in the long nights he spent on duty at the desk in the station house, it seemed to the worried, disappointed old sergeant that everything conspired to keep constantly before his mind the great mistake he had made in Patrolman Jerry Moore.

Once it was quiet, decent old Tom Brennan, waiting until the coast was clear to deliver an unofficial report that did not go on the blotter.

"I saw him, Matt," he said. "He didn't say much. Just that he was sorry. Asked about you."

"And"—the messenger paused, as if uncertain whether to go on or not—"he wanted—he wanted you to tell her—Annie—that she should wait till he explains."

Grimly the old desk man's face hardened. "Wait, is it?" he repeated. "Wait! Sure, Annie Gibbons don't have to wait for no man. Do you tell him that, Tom, if you see him ag'in. Annie won't be waitin' for the likes o' him!"

But, even as Tom Brennan shook his head regretfully and turned away, Matt Gibbons knew he was lying. And when old Tom reported later that the message had been delivered, he questioned whether he had not been hasty. Annie, he knew in his heart, would be waiting—for many a weary year, probably. For she had given her heart utterly to Jerry Moore, and Annie was not the changeable kind. How deeply she was hurt, only her father knew—and he not all of it.

Or, sometimes, it would be Shifty Samuels, slyly dropping a word here and there, where he knew it would hurt.

"Saw your friend Moore down the line to-night," he would say, with an affectation of casualness, which would not have deceived any who knew him. "Rollin' drunk an' playin' pool in 'Frenchy's!'" Ain't workin', is he, since he turned in his star? Not at an honest job, I mean. They say he's runnin' in loads for Reagan, couple times a week."

Old Matt never answered and strove to ignore the implied taunt, but it cut him to the depths of his honest old heart. He was not surprised, in a way, to hear that Jerry was now definitely over the border line that separates law from lawlessness. If he was bad—if all his decent, manly qualities had been assumed—it was reasonable to suppose that he was all bad. Broken, disgraced, thrown off the force, he might be expected to gravitate to the cesspool of vice and corruption that made up a large part of Precinct 2—a district whose denizens, mistakenly viewing its grosser pleasures as the height of enjoyment possible to life, lived fast and furiously until they were swallowed up in its maw.

There was one night when the new commissioner dropped in, unheralded. The desk man knew him from his pictures—a tall, straight, soldierly figure, he looked the war hero he was pictured by the newspapers, when the mayor had chosen him to replace the ancient, easy-going party war horse who had held down the job. Somehow, in spite of a preconceived dislike of the man, old Matt found in him something that compelled admiration and respect.

It was during their brief chat in the front office that the sergeant had contrived to mention the case of Patrolman Moore. "It was quite a surprise," he had ventured. "The lad seemed a good officer. He was tellin' us that he fought with you Over There. It was hard for you, maybe, to have to break him."

He looked up to find the commissioner regarding him curiously.

"Yes," admitted the latter, slowly. "Yes—it *was* hard."

He seemed to be on the point of saying more, but at that moment Captain Steinaman unexpectedly hurried in the front door, and there was no further opportunity. The captain, it appeared, had heard from some source or other that the commissioner was abroad in Precinct 2 and had hastened to offer his services as guide. It seemed to Matt that the offer was not particularly welcome, but the commissioner accepted it, and the two went out in company.

"Funny!" the old sergeant muttered to himself, as he turned back to his work. "He don't look like the kind of a man would break a cop without good reason. But he's a soldier, and some soldiers are hard. They have to be. Chances are this fellow would have done all he could for Jerry. But when he see it was no use—snap! Off come the badge! That's the way he was trained. I'll not hold it against him."

Strangely enough, it appeared that any resentment which might have been harbored against the new commissioner because of his summary fashion of dealing with Patrolman Moore was confined to Captain Steinaman. On the evening after the commissioner's visit, Sergeant Gibbons found the captain waiting for a word with him when he reported for duty.

"Let me know, sergeant," he ordered, "if the commissioner shows up around here again. Not only to-night, but every night. You can get me on the telephone at home, and if I'm not there, tell whoever answers to get word to me. Remember—I want to know at once if he's in the precinct. No telling what trouble he might get into, prowling around all alone—to say nothing of spying on good cops, who might be off the beat for a minute or two for good reason. We don't want any more of that, eh, sergeant?"

The desk man agreed, but he was not a little puzzled. The captain had never been one to display solicitude for the welfare of the men under him, except, possibly, Shifty Samuels and one or two other favorites. But he said nothing and agreed to notify the commander promptly if the commissioner appeared again.

AS for ex-Patrolman Jerry Moore, if he felt any remorse as a result of his changed estate, he concealed it admirably. There was every evidence that when he had doffed the uniform, he had shed with it every shred of ambition and self-respect—every tie that had bound him to the world of law and order on the other side of the border line.

The district that had known him as an enemy, as a symbol of the repressive influence of society, knew him now as one of its own. Distrustfully, at first, but then tolerantly, and finally without reserve, it welcomed him as a proselyte worth winning. Within a month, he was definitely "one of the bunch" that hung about Frenchy's pool room and Reagan's guestless "hotel"—a place that had been a small, third-rate hostelry in the old pre-Volstead days, but was now little more than a cloak for a prosperous blind pig. The shabby rooms above the bar were now never tenanted by lodgers, and the only "meals" consisted of thin soup and sandwiches, served over the bar; but the proprietor clung to the hotel legend, nevertheless.

He was a man of parts in the district where his activities centered—was Dan Reagan. Old-timers there knew it, and newcomers speedily found it out. His power and influence were far-reaching. This was due to many reasons. When an habitué of the district was hungry and broke, as many of them frequently were, Dan Reagan was always ready to feed and stake him. When one got into trouble, as many frequently did, Dan Reagan was always ready with a bail bond or the money to meet a fine. And sometimes, in extreme cases, where a word was needed to those who occupied the seats of the mighty, it was Dan Reagan who could get access to the right ear into which to speak the word.

Some of this had been known to Jerry Moore before he left the force, and the rest came to him speedily, once he forsook the old life for the new. He had been spending his time aimlessly in the

numerous hang-outs that were available to his kind, and he had picked up acquaintance with dozens of drifters, apparently as purposeless in life as himself; but it was not until the end of another month that the suggestion came that he might find it advantageous to "see Reagan," if the exchequer chanced to be low. And, then, it was Frenchy Bouillet himself who advanced the suggestion.

"Sure," he agreed amiably one day, when the former patrolman broached the matter of a small loan. "I'll stake yuh to eats. But why don't yuh git wise to yourself—git some reg'lar dough? A good, strong, healthy bird like you hadn't oughta be panhandlin'! Yuh know the ropes, too. Why don't yuh grab yourself off somethin'?"

"How?"

"Oh, lots o' ways." Frenchy was airily indefinite. There's all kinds o' rackets that pay good dough. Why don't yuh see Reagan?"

"Maybe I will," promised the borrower, and he was as good as his word. The same afternoon found him idling at Reagan's bar, waiting for a chance to get the ear of the proprietor. And when the chance offered, he was not slow to take advantage of it.

"Frenchy thought you might be able to put me in the way of makin' a few dollars," he explained. "How about it?"

"He did, eh?" Reagan eyed the questioner closely. Despite the contrast between the trim, neat figure of two months earlier and the seedy, unkempt, unwashed derelict of to-day, there was still a suggestion of strength in Moore's appearance—strength that might be utilized to good advantage by such a man as Reagan. The latter evidently thought so, as his words indicated.

"Well, maybe Frenchy's right. You're the cop that was busted by the new commissioner, ain't yuh? Broke yuh quick, didn't he?"

"He did, the rat. And I'll break him even quicker, if I ever get the chance."

The reply seemed to please Reagan immensely. "Yuh will, eh?" He laughed. "Well, there's others that will, too, so far as that goes. He's damned nosey, that lad! If he keeps stickin' it in where it ain't wanted, somebody's going to bite it off one o' these days. Might be you as well as anybody.

"But it's a job yuh want, ain't it?" he went on, still watching the other man closely. "An' what kind of a job?"

"I don't care—so long as there's dough in it!"

"No? Well, it so happens that I got a little job yuh could do for me—you an' a couple other good lads. To-night! Be a half-century apiece in it fer yuh, if it's done right. Nothin' hard about it—jest go along with a truck from one place to another an' see that nobody monkeys with what's in it. Nobody'll bother yuh, prob'ly, but if they do, there may be a little shootin'. How about it?"

"Where's the truck, and when do we start?"

Reagan was obviously beginning to like this new recruit better and better. He grinned his pleasure at the prompt acceptance of the proposition.

"Quick on the trigger, ain't yuh? Well, that won't hurt nothin'. But there ain't no hurry. The other boys'll be around pretty soon, and I'll put yuh next to 'em. Maybe yuh know 'em—Louie the Yid, and Tony Mazo?"

Moore nodded. He did know them casually, as soft-handed, hard-eyed young men who swaggered about in the district, without visible occupation, but apparently with ample incomes. Presently he met them both formally and was accepted by them indifferently as their ally for the enterprise that impended. As the up-to-date reader probably has surmised, it was nothing more or less than the convoying of a load of what passes nowadays for liquor—poor stuff, by any standards, but with sufficient marketable value to make protection against "hijacking" advisable.

They accomplished the task successfully and in due time were presented by Reagan with the reward therefore—five crisp bills apiece that represented, for one evening's employment, as much as Moore had earned in two weeks as a guardian of the peace and order of the community. Is it any wonder that his response to Reagan's hint that other and

more important jobs might be found for him, was prompt and eager?

OTHER jobs were forthcoming—many of them. At first, they were easy, simple tasks, such as had marked his initial venture into criminality. For the most part they dealt with the illegal traffic in liquor, and Reagan appeared to have an enormous business in that commodity. But not all of them were concerned with the industry which Mr. Volstead created; Reagan had other interests, and all was fish that came into his net.

Usually Moore was accompanied by Louie, the pale, thin, silent youth who seemed to be highest in Reagan's favor. Sometimes, it was Tony Mazo, sleek Sicilian, who had broken away from the immigrant parents who nurtured him to "make an easy living" in ways they abhorred. Moore liked him better than Louie the Yid. Tony's disposition was considerably more agreeable, although he was just as coldly efficient and unscrupulous in action as his fellow. Sometimes, it was all three of them, and there were many times when the undertakings they carried out required an even larger personnel, which Reagan recruited readily.

One of these latter was the wrecking of a road house on the edge of the district. For some reason or other, the proprietor, one Joe Colombo by name, was in disfavor with Reagan. The penalty was swift and terrifying, to one not used to the ways of gangland. For, under the capable leadership of Louie, some half-dozen individuals, who masqueraded as "convention delegates" and thus got inside, completely wrecked the road house one night and left Joe Colombo on the floor of his gaudy dance hall, past caring what happened in this world of strife and travail.

It was after this adventure that Moore, chatting idly one afternoon with Tony Mazo, happened to mention that their employer was "a bad man to have in the other corner."

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "But it ain't him, altogether. It's The Big Feller! That wasn't fer Reagan—that job last night. Him and Colombo never had no trouble, personal. Joe was in wrong with The Big Feller, some way; that's what cooked him."

Moore looked curious. "You mean that Reagan ain't—that he ain't The Big Feller?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" Tony's tone was slightly scornful. "You ain't been all this time thinkin' he was, have yuh? Huh! Dan Reagan ain't the main squeeze around here. He takes his orders, same as us, only he gits 'em from The Big Feller. That's the difference."

Moore seemed to be impressed by the other's superior wisdom. "Oh, that's it," he commented. "Well, it don't make no difference, anyway. Reagan's big enough for me, so long as he pays regular. I should worry where the dough comes from, long's I get it."

Tony smiled approval. "Sure!" he agreed. "That's the dope."

"But I wonder who The Big Feller really is," Moore speculated idly. "You don't know, do you, Tony?"

"No, I don't, an' I dunno's I want to," replied the Sicilian promptly. "Anyway, I ain't takin' no chances tryin' to find out. It ain't healthy; I know that much."

He looked around him. They were in Reagan's bar, but there was no one near.

"But I can tell yuh one thing," he added, in a low tone, with the manner of one who is proud of superior knowledge. "I know where he hangs out!"

Moore looked interested, but only mildly so. He waited.

"Yes, sir," continued Tony. "The Acacia Apartments—that's where!

"Yuh needn't laugh," he added indignantly, nettled by the other man's incredulous smile. "I know what I'm talkin' about. I ain't so dumb but what I can add two an' two. An' I know that's where The Big Feller hangs out—leastways, that's where Reagan sees him. If it ain't," he went on, argumentatively, "why does Reagan go there every time we pull a big job—either before or after an' sometimes both? Why's he got keys to the place? He don't live there, does he? What's he doin' with keys to it,

then? An' why's he so damn careful nobody sees him goin' in or out?

"An' I can tell yuh 'nother thing. 'Member that little diamond man we stuck up last week—Goldstein, I guess, his name was? Well, Louie an' me done that job, and we give Reagan the stuff—whole bag o' sparklers, there was! An' you know what he done with it? He took it to the Acacia that same night. How do I know? 'Cause I went with him, that's why. Far as the door, I mean. O' course, he didn't tell me what he had in the bundle he was carryin', but I knew. I oughta know—I had to pry the diamond guy's hands off that bag after Louie croaked him. An' when Reagan asked me to take a walk with him, because he was carryin' a big roll and didn't want to take no chances o' bein' stuck up, he wasn't kiddin' me any. I know he took them sparklers to the Acacia an' left 'em there. Who would he be takin' 'em to, if not The Big Feller?"

Who, indeed? Moore's face indicated his bewilderment at what Tony had so gratuitously revealed. The Acacia Apartments—a hang-out of The Big Feller! That was something to ponder over.

He knew the place well; it was on Post 4, which he had trod nightly until disaster overtook him. A block of small bedroom-bath-and-parlor flats, inhabited chiefly by bachelor men-about-town, who could afford the rather high rentals. Ultrarespectable, it was perhaps one of the last places in the city for hunted criminals.

"You're crazy, Tony! Why, the Acacia is full of respectable people. The deputy commissioner himself lives there! And Alderman Luff and Major Farmer, the theater man, and Captain Steinaman, and even Doctor Willis, the preacher at that big church across the park! I know a lot of them; I used to have that beat. You're crazy, my boy! The Big Feller ain't in the Acacia. That's a high-toned place!"

But Tony Mazo, while he conceded the strength of the case against his theory, refused to be convinced. What he knew, he knew. And it was this doggedness of conviction, coupled with his willingness to go to any length to prove his point, that made Tony Mazo an unwitting instrument which the law he hated utilized within the next few hours. Through him, in fact, it was to score its biggest triumph of many years over the crookdom to which he owed allegiance.

IN the imposing entrance hall of the Acacia Apartments a light burned, but the illumination it provided was not brilliant or glaring; rather, it was restrained and softened, in keeping with the dignity of the place. Nevertheless, it was obviously none too restrained for the taste of the two men who approached the entrance a little before midnight and paused before the outer door. They were not exactly furtive in their movements, and passers-by might never have given them a second look, although their appearance — both wore caps — might have aroused some curiosity on the part of those familiar with the character of the tenants who rightfully used the latch-keys there. But there was something in the manner of the man who bent to place his key in the lock, and in the anxious looks which his waiting companion cast up and down the deserted street, that would have told a keen observer they courted no unnecessary attention.

Could any such observer have overheard their whispered colloquy in the wide, marble-lined hall to which the door admitted them, this impression would have been considerably strengthened. For the smaller man, who seemed nervous and on edge with excitement, suddenly clutched his companion—he who had wielded the key—by the arm and whispered hoarsely: "Listen! What—what's that?"

The larger man listened for a moment, straining his ears forward, while he held his breath. Then: "Nothing," he said. "I don't hear anything. Pull yourself together! Where's your nerve! You ain't losing it now, are you—after we've got this far?"

The other seemed to make a desperate effort to control himself. But terror gripped him. His face was wet.

"Gawd!" he groaned, still in the hoarse whisper. "I wish we hadn't come! If Reagan ever wakes up an' misses them keys 'fore we git back! Gawd!"

His companion laid a hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

"Oh, brace up, Tony," he said. "Reagan is drunk enough to sleep the clock round. He'll never wake up till long after we've slipped 'em back into his pocket. An' we'll have the sparklers safely hid by that time, with nobody the wiser. Then, after the excitement is all over, we can dig 'em up and live like millionaires. It's soft, Tony, if you just keep your nerve."

But—was it? Ex-Patrolman Jerry Moore was inclined to doubt it, despite his reassuring words to Tony Mazo. It seemed now like a crazy, impossible venture—even crazier and more impossible than it had seemed to Tony Mazo when the other man had broached it to him. It had taken many hours of argument, of cajolery, of appeals to every emotion from courage to cupidity, to beat down Tony Mazo's objections and fears. And now that the venture was launched, and there could be no going back, the arguments that had prevailed then seemed far-fetched and visionary.

They were inside the Acacia Apartments, which Tony had reason to believe held the lair of The Big Feller and, presumably, much of his loot. And they had, or believed they had, a key that would unlock that lair to them—a key filched from the pocket of the sleeping Reagan an hour before. But behind which of the many doors that gave from the hallways was The Big Feller's den? And, even if they found it, would the den be untenanted and undefended? Or would they walk in unsuspectingly to certain death at the hands of an arch-criminal who already had blood enough on his hands to free him from worry over a little more? True, the stakes were high, if Tony Mazo had correctly estimated the value of the Goldstein diamonds, but so was the risk!

All this flitted through the mind of Jerry Moore, as he stood, listening, staring at the tiny key in his hand, as if he hoped to read the answer to the riddle there. There was nothing about the key, however, to give him a clew. It was an ordinary flat lock key, such as are set in most office and apartment doors. There was neither number nor letter upon it to indicate which door it fitted. Would he have to try it in all of them, with the attendant increased risk of discovery?

Fate—or luck or chance or whatever you choose to call the mysterious influence that meddles so opportunely every now and then in the affairs of mortals—made the decision for him. Somewhere above, apparently on the next floor, a door slammed. Footsteps echoed on the polished floor. Loud, in the stillness! But not louder, it seemed to Moore, than the beating of his own heart. Now they were approaching the stairway. A moment more, and they would be discovered. Perhaps by The Big Feller himself.

Swiftly Moore grasped the trembling Mazo by the arm, just in time to prevent a bolt through the street door. Abruptly he propelled the other man forward. Down the hall, past the doors that opened to their right. A man was coming down the stairway now; they could see his feet and legs, descending, as they passed to the rear.

"Don't turn!" whispered Moore. "Don't look back!"

Smartly, but not so fast as to give the appearance of undue haste, he walked on, all the way to the end of the hall. The man was off the stairs now—was opening the street door. Moore stole a quick glance over his shoulder. The man was looking back at them; idly curious, probably, and preparing to hail what he believed to be an acquaintance. What to do? Something—and quickly! The quicker the better.

There were two doors at the end of the hall. Over one of them a light shone dimly through a transom. Over the other was darkness. Swiftly Moore chose. Key in hand, he bent to fumble at the lock. A moment would be enough—then the man would be gone. Half involuntarily he slipped the key into the lock and turned it gently.

And the bolt slid back!

HAD The Big Feller—or even a "little feller"—popped out of the darkness at them then, it is doubtful if either would have survived the shock. The discovery that the key fitted—that blind luck had led him to the right door—left Jerry Moore as weak in reaction as the proverbial cat. And Tony Mazo was so far from the jaunty, cold-blooded killer he was popularly supposed to be, that Moore unconsciously put a hand over his mouth to still the sound of his chattering teeth.

But the luck which had guided them so far was not yet ready to leave them to their own devices. If this was really the lair of The Big Feller, as the fact that the key fitted seemed to indicate, it was a deserted one. They satisfied themselves of that, slowly and cautiously, by searching every corner of the three rooms with Moore's flash light, Tony at his shoulder with gun ready for action in case of need. The rooms were small, and the inspection took little time.

"Shut the door!" ordered Moore, and his companion slipped obediently into the tiny vestibule and closed the outer door, which they had left ajar to provide a means of quick exit if necessary. By the time he had returned, Moore had snapped on the lights in the bathroom, where he deemed illumination was less likely to attract attention from the street. Now he was ready to begin another search—this time, presumably, for plunder.

It was noticeable, however, that his first choice of hunting ground was not the small safe that stood in one corner of the bedroom, nor even the chests of drawers and other possible hiding places for objects of concern to ordinary looters. Instead, he went direct to a little writing desk that stood in the luxuriously furnished living room, and here he began a methodical search and inspection of the books and papers he found there. A muttered exclamation from Tony Mazo drew him from his task, however, before he had gone far. Alarmedly he looked up to see what had caused it.

Tony was holding up for him to view a small cloth bag, fitted with a draw string at the top and stained and discolored on one side. The Sicilian's eyes were blazing with excitement and eagerness, like a hound on a keen scent.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "That's the bag I took away from the guy! The sparklers was in it!"

In spite of himself, Moore thrilled to the announcement. There was, then, no mistake. They were, beyond reasonable doubt, within the lair of The Big Feller.

"He took 'em out o' the bag," Tony went on. "S'pose he's took 'em away somewheres—a'ready!"

"No," Moore demurred. "Likely they're in the safe, there. Is it locked? Let's see."

Surprisingly, it was not. The heavy door responded to their first tug at it and swung open, revealing several drawers and compartments filled with books, papers, and small packages. Excitedly, with hands that fumbled in spite of them, they searched these swiftly.

"Ah!" Tony had found it—a tiny drawer that seemed to be filled with radiant light, so brilliantly did its contents sparkle! "Ah—the sparklers!"

Panting with eagerness, the little gunman scooped the gems up into his hands, as if luxuriating in the feel of them. He made queer little sounds of delight, as he held them for Moore to see, but the latter was paying scant attention. He had found something else that interested him. A bank book—several bank books.

Hastily he opened one of these and turned to the light to read the name revealed there. Immediately an exclamation escaped him. It might have been either astonishment or satisfaction—or both. Strong emotion, contorted his face; his hand closed and crumpled the stiff covers of the book like tissue paper. He shivered slightly.

"Look, Tony! There's The Big Feller!"

•

LOATH to take his eyes from the diamonds, Tony was not quick to respond. Too slow—for Fate had decreed that Tony Mazo was never to know, in this world, the identity of the master he had served!

Engrossed in their respective finds, neither had caught a warning. And now, with the startling shock of a thunderclap out of a clear sky, came the clicking of a lock—the lock which the stolen key had opened for them. A voice—first indistinct, and then clear, as the door was thrown open: "Oh, come on in and get a drink. I'll make it all right if they spot you. Come on!"

A paralysis of terror gripped Moore's limbs. He could not move; he even found it difficult to breathe. Even if a way of escape had been open, he could not have taken it. Trapped! And just when——

The voices were in the vestibule now. A light was snapped on. And then:

"What's that?" A voice Moore knew—a voice high pitched with alarm! "There's been somebody in here. Quick! The lights!"

From where Tony Mazo crouched at his side, Moore heard a low hissing of indrawn breath. Then—a blaze of light—a quick, blurred glimpse of blue at the door—blue like his old uniform.

"Jee! The cops!" Tony's cry was almost like a woman's scream—a woman in agony.

Then, the roar of guns. Stabs of flame shooting back and forth. The thud of bullets against targets—soft targets of flesh! Two guns—three guns—all roaring at once. And then—silence! Smothered in the thick, acrid smoke of gunpowder, the echoes died away.

Slowly Moore raised himself from the floor beside the safe, where he had fallen backward at the instant the lights went on. Dazedly, blinking in the smoke, he looked about him. At his feet, face down, with a smoking gun extended before him, was Tony Mazo. Blood trickled beside him, covering the brilliant gems he had dropped a few moments earlier. One glance was enough—Tony Mazo's career was over!

Over by the door, two other figures—two figures in the blue of law and order—lay prone on the floor. He could not tell, from where he stood, whether they were dead or alive. Dazed, incapable of collected thought, he did not care. Curiously he stared at them.

Suddenly he heard the tinkle of a bell close at hand—a telephone. His eyes sought out the instrument on a little table near him. Slowly he picked it up and held the receiver to his ear.

"Hello!" he said. . . . "Who? . . . Oh, yes, he's here, but he can't talk. . . . Why? Because he's dead, I guess!"

There was a pause apparently, while the person at the other end of the wire debated whether the speaker was drunk or crazy. Then:

"Oh, it's you, is it, Matt? . . . What? Why, this is Jerry—Jerry Moore!"

Another pause, and:

"Who's there, you say? The commissioner? Good! Send him over. And, Matt, put somebody on the desk and come yourself. Bring a doctor, too—or the coroner. No, I'm not drunk. There's been killing here. Make it snappy!"

A little wearily, he set down the telephone and turned to face the horde of horror-stricken Acacia Apartments tenants who, aroused by the shots, were gathering at the door.

CLINGING stubbornly to life, despite the great holes which Tony Mazo's bullets had torn in him, Captain Steinaman, The Big Feller, died. But not until the competent little medico, whom Desk Sergeant Gibbons had summoned from bed, had pumped into his veins enough heart stimulant to enable him to taunt, with his last breaths, the commissioner he had betrayed.

"Oh, I had you all fooled," he gasped, between labored breaths. "Made monkeys out of all of you! Had you all running around in circles after The Big Feller, didn't I? Never suspected me, any of you! Fools—that's why. No brains. Never got me if it wasn't—if it wasn't——

"I told Reagan not to trust that damned Moore! I thought there was something phony—about—about——"

The choked, muffled voice died away. The defiant eyes closed. Slowly the doctor let the head sink back upon the rug that had been rolled up for a pillow.

"He's gone," he said.

Desk Sergeant Matt Gibbons drew a

long breath. "I can't believe it yet! Steinaman—The Big Feller! Runnin' the precinct with one hand an' the crooks in the district with the other! Don't seem possible, does it? But when did you suspect it was him, Jerry?" he asked curiously.

"About one second before him and Shifty Samuels came bustin' in the door. I had just found his bank books in the safe. I knew when we found the Goldstein loot we was in the right place, but I didn't know whose place it was till I read the name. Then I knew! A lot of things was clear, then. But, just as I was showin' the book to Tony, in they come. Tony let go with his gun an'—zowie! All hell broke loose.

"I'm sorry about Tony," he added after a moment. "He wasn't the worst lad in the world. I had to fool him—make him think I wanted to steal the diamonds—so he'd swipe the keys from Reagan. He was scared stiff, but he went through with it. Poor Tony!"

The doctor, meanwhile, had been working over the second of the blue-coated casualties—Shifty Samuels. Now he sought the commissioner's attention.

"This fellow isn't badly hurt," he pronounced. "If we can get him to a hospital right away, he'll be all right. Three holes in him, but none in a vital spot."

A groan from Samuels punctuated this verdict. The commissioner motioned for two of his men to take the wounded man away.

"Put a guard over him," he directed. "We'll want to find out how much he knew about Steinaman—about The Big Feller—when he's well enough to talk."

Samuels was evidently not too far gone to know what was going on. He raised himself on the stretcher, as they carried him out.

"Ah, you ain't got nothin' on me!" he sneered. "I come in here wit' the captain. He told me to. An' when we run into a couple o' burglars, I naturally let 'em have it. You ain't got nothin' on me!"

"He's probably right," the commissioner admitted, after they had taken him away. "But we'll have a try at it, anyway. Doubtful if there's any evidence against him, but he's walked his last beat. I'll take care of that."

"And good riddance," remarked Sergeant Matt Gibbons fervently. He looked a little uncertainly at Jerry Moore and then at the commissioner. Events had been moving so fast that he had found little time for consideration of one matter to which he had previously given much thought, and the commissioner's promise as to Shifty Samuels apparently recalled it. He thought of something.

"We'll be needin' a good man for Post 4, then," he suggested. "You'll maybe be puttin' Moore back on it, sir, after this?"

"No." The commissioner's tone seemed regretful, but decisive. The sergeant's face fell.

"But ain't he earned another chance, sir?" he persisted. "Ain't he earned his chance to come back—to the force, I mean, sir?"

He stopped, staring with a puzzled frown from Moore to the commissioner. Both were smiling. But the commissioner took pity on him.

"He hasn't been off it, sergeant, as a matter of fact," he said. "Show him, Moore!"

Jerry Moore fumbled a moment in an inner pocket. He drew out a slip of paper and passed it to the puzzled desk man.

"Here, Matt," he said. "I'd have told you, but the commissioner thought it would be safest if nobody knew. And I passed my word."

It was another special order, dated the same as the one even then hanging on the board in the station house:

Patrolman Jeremiah A. Moore, this day dismissed from the police force, is hereby reinstated, with the rank of sergeant, and detailed for special duty under the direct orders of the commissioner. All members of the department below the rank of deputy commissioner are hereby directed to cooperate with him on demand, disregarding all other rules and orders, until further notice.

Old Matt Gibbons read it through.

"Jerry," he said. "It's an old fool that I am—an' a liar. You'll mind the message I sent by Tom Brennan? 'Twas a lie! Jerry, Annie's waitin'!"

Putting the Skids Under Skuds

By Jim Fellom

Author of "The Wherewithal," "Transplanting a Vi'let," Etc.

Believing himself an outlaw, and despairing of ever seeing his sweetheart again, Dave Ross took refuge at the lonely cabin of a lively old prospector. There things transpired that gave affairs another aspect.

SO, you think a two-gun man is pretty tough, do you? Well, what do you allow for an old kid who packs four? That's Ichabod Skuds.

Yes, sir, and there ain't much to him outside of a beautiful, curled-up mustache, a couple of cabbage-leaf ears and hands several sizes too big for him. But I'm forgetting the most important thing —his pants. They were *some* pants, let me tell you. He'd invented them. They're made of real leather, and the waistband is a three-decker cartridge belt, and the front and back pockets have been remodeled into holsters for packing his light and heavy artillery—a brace of .38s and a ditto of .45s.

In them days, the camp of Whywurry was fire and brimstone. If you tried minding your own business, somebody'd put you out of your misery, if you didn't flick a bullet into him first. That's where this little cuss, Ichabod—— But I'm ahead of my story. And as for his pants, they don't cut much ice, anyhow.

Around about the time peaches are ripening, moonlight and roses have come into my life. She ain't what you'd call pretty, but she's got the sweetest ways, and when it comes to cooking she don't know nothing else but. Her name's Idabelle, and all we do, day in and day out, is sit in her kitchen and hold hands and grin love at one another. You see, I could afford to loaf. I'd sold some gold claims and had, oh, maybe, seven hundred pesos in my money belt. I always pack my roll with me.

Anyway, I'm about as happy as a goat in a corncrib. Lots of good eats, Idabelle all to myself, and our wedding day just around the corner. Then in steps Ichabod and curdles the milk.

He comes over from Silver City—that's thirty miles east—one evening, while me and Idabelle are in the kitchen.

as per usual. You understand, I don't know this Skuds person—never had even heard of him. Him and Idabelle's dad are in the parlor talking, and pretty soon I hear Ichabod holler out that he'll foreclose on the home if he don't get his coin. Old Gordon pleads and pleads, and Idabelle begins to cry.

"Either you have my money when I call to-morrow at ten, or out you go," roars Ichabod. "The whole five hundred and interest to date—nothing less. Get me?"

"Have a heart, Mr. Skuds—please! I don't care for myself, but you're turning my little daughter out of the only home she's ever known. Please give me just thirty days' grace," whimpers old Gordon.

"I'll give you nothing. You come across in the morning or start packing," barks back Mr. Skuds.

WELL, sir, I just naturally saw red. I couldn't wait and see my sweetie's dad lose the old homestead. I'd have been a mighty poor son-in-law if I did. So, I went to his rescue, like any he-man might have done. I walked into the parlor and caught Mr. Skuds by the neck and threw him out of the house on his head.

"That's your interest. Call around to-morrow, and I'll pay you the principal," says I, patting my six-cylinder gently.

"You'll pay dearer than that, Mister Man," he warns me, getting up and brushing the gravel out of his ear.

"I'll satisfy you, don't worry, if my trigger finger holds out."

I'm young and devilish, you understand, and living in a tough country, where law and order ain't got no more chance than a snowball in Death Valley—that's the next hottest place I know of—so I'm pretty sure Mr. Skuds won't be none too anxious to close out old Gordon while I'm cruising around.

And I'm more or less right. He don't show up next morning, nor the next. Maybe five days drift by—no Ichabod. I'm too busy being happy with Idabelle to pay any attention to a minor detail like him. Fact is, I never gave him no more than a casual thought. Which was my tough luck.

One Saturday night—it's a little after midnight, and I'd just said au revoir to Idabelle—I reach my shanty, open the door, and strike a match to light the lamp. And, as I do, I turn around and there, sitting on my bunk, with a six-shooter staring me plumb in the eye, is the Silver City gentleman himself.

"Excuse me for intruding, but I came after the principal—Mr. Gordon's loan, you know. You promised to pay it, you'll remember," he says with a bright smile.

"Sure enough, I did," I came back, feeling like taking the gun away from him and banging him over the head with it, but I don't. "Let's see—how much was that?" I ask him pleasantly.

"Five hundred and seventy-five dollars'll clean it up nicely. That's including interest for two years and a small collection fee. My time's valuable, Mr. Ross."

Well, sir, I fall back against the wall and bust out laughing.

"Why, you old hoss thief!" I sneer, kidding him. "You don't know the war is over. And so you come here to collect with a gat, eh?"

Gee, but I'd hit him a stinger! He reared up like an Arizona tarantula, and off the bunk he leaped, and in about a jump and a half he's standing so close to me that he's fanning my nose with his instrument of death.

"What do you mean—hoss thief?" he sputters—his eyes like to burn holes through me. "Are you insinuating, Mr. Ross?"

"I'll apologize, stranger, for my mistake. I sure never meant to insult the hoss thieves that bad." As I said it, I made a grab for his gun, and missed it.

He was just a hair too speedy for me. He sprang back, and, figuring it was now or never, I jerked out my persuader, my intentions being, you understand, to get the upper hand of him and boot him out of the shack. I didn't want to have any real serious trouble with him, that's a fact.

But he forced me into it. He cut loose with that ivory-handled man-killer

of his. *Whang! Whang!* One bullet clipped the fanciest groove through my pompadour you ever saw, and, sooner than stand there till he got the range and gave me quietus, as the fellow says, I start doing a little reckless shooting myself. And, before you could have taken a deep breath, the battle is over.

Out the front door staggers Ichabod. The smoke is thick as fog in the room, but I've seen something red streaming down the side of his face, and it fetches me up with a jolt. Self-defense or no self-defense, I've got a prejudice against murder. So, for about ten seconds, I stand kind of like I was froze to the floor. Then I go tearing out after him, all in but the shoe strings.

The moon is round as a dollar, almost dead center. There's a fifty-foot trail leading from my shack to the street. I live on the edge of town, and right back of me are the foothills climbing up into the range. I'm just in time to see Ichabod drop midway between my cabin and the street.

I go sick all over, but I reach him on the run.

"Mr. Skuds! Mr. Skuds! Are you hit bad?" I ask him. My throat is dry as sandpaper.

He turns his head and his eyes look glassy in the moonlight.

"You—you murderer! You've—you've killed me!" he gasps, hateful.

He raises his gun to within six inches of my ear, but that's as far as he gets. Before he can pull the trigger, his arm falls, and he lies there staring up at the sky, motionless.

FOR some moments I sit on my heels looking at him. My blood is turning to ice in my veins. I get to gazing at the wound in his head, and pretty soon I go panicky. Up I jump, my brains scrambled. I can't think straight. About all that stands out plain to me, is that I've murdered him, and that I'll be arrested and maybe hung, or sent to jail for life. I don't stop to reason out anything. Right then I can't reason, except to realize that I have to hide—get out of Camp Whywurry—sneak off to some place where the sheriff can't find me, and stay hid. If they ever catch me, I'm gone, and I know it.

And, as if it was to start me on my way, I hear a couple of men running up the street, excited. They might as well have been a posse of deputies coming to arrest me. They couldn't have throwed a worse scare into me. I dash back to the shack; and I'll never be able to tell you how I did it, but half an hour or so afterward, when I come to myself, I'm stretched out, exhausted, on a patch of sand in a lonesome canyon, maybe three miles from Whywurry, with a sackful of grub and clothes and a canteen of water. All I know is, that I'm there.

Well, I lay and rested for some time and kept my ears glued to the silence. The sweat was pouring off of me. My foot hurt where I'd stumbled against a rock, and I'd barked one of my shins. But all that bothered me was—whether they'd found Ichabod Skuds' body yet, and how long before they'd start hunting for me. You'll remember he fell on the trail that led to my cabin, and that would have been enough evidence for any sheriff to form a suspicion on.

Anyway, I wasn't going to be caught if I could help it. So, on I went again. With the canteen slung to one shoulder and the sack over the other, I struck straight for the summit of the range, sometimes crawling up the slope of a hill, other times dog-trotting up a gorge. Lordy, but I traveled fast! I drove myself, so to speak, and just put every ounce of pep I had in me into that getaway. I aimed to get as far from Whywurry before morning as I could.

Hour after hour I kept on and on. I went over the range, dropped onto a sand flat, about six miles wide, trotted across it, and tackled some more mountains. And my feet were swollen and bleeding, and there was a wild singing in my ears from too much listening. I was afraid to stop to rest, because I mightn't be able to get up again. My whole body was that sore.

I said before that I was panicky. I sure was. Almost every minute of that awful night, while I was tearing like mad over the moonlit desert, trying to lose myself where I'd never be found, the

picture of Ichabod Skuds lying on the trail, his glassy eyes fixed on the sky, was framed in my mind so plain that after a spell I began to think I was looking at it—that it was there in front of me. Everywhere I gazed, I saw him sprawled out, his head stained, staring at the sky.

It was haunting me—going to my brain. And I know, if I didn't fight off the notion, it'd set me loco, and the sun next day would finish me—curl me up like a roasted maggot. So, between fighting this terror and pushing on over that hell waste at top speed, daybreak comes at last, gradually fading out the moon.

I'd got over the crest of that second range and was wabbling through a foothill gulch on the other side. I was dead on my feet. My canteen was more than half empty, but it felt like so much lead. You can just imagine how that sack of grub and clothes must have felt. But I hung onto them as tight as a mother to her babe.

And, all the time, I was light-headed and didn't know it. And, even after I'd been smelling fried onions for five minutes, I couldn't tell what they were, until I bumped square into a rock cabin. That's all I remember for a good five days. When I come to, it's night. I'm in bed, and so weak and stiff I can't move. I open my eyes, and there, sitting at a table, reading a magazine by the light of a candle, is a little, stoop-shouldered old man with billy-goat whiskers. Pretty soon he looks over at me and sees I'm awake.

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to dig you a grave," he cackles. He hobbles up to the bunk and perches himself on the edge and watches me with his blue, beady eyes. "Got lost, didn't you? Ain't used to walking. Your feet are cut to ribbons."

"It's mighty fine of you to take me in, dad," says I.

"You're a human being, ain't you? But you was awful lucky, let me tell you. I aimed to go to town just after breakfast—quitting here, quitting my claims—grub all eat up. I was cooking my last mess—plain onions—when you rang my doorbell." He busted into a shrill, wild laugh.

"How far is town, and what's the name of it?" I ask him.

"Silver City—ten miles, due south. But nobody ever comes this way. You're safe here, do you understand? I don't care where you're from—nothing about you. You've got a good face. We're going to eat now—your grub. All I can throw in is salt and pepper. It was pretty lucky for me, too, that you came when you did."

That's how I became acquainted with "Uncle Billy" McCroy, the lonely old prospector of the Painted Hills.

HE was a comical granddad, nothing but skin and bone, but quick as a chipmunk. An owl ain't any wiser. I found that he'd intended going to Silver City and working at odd jobs till he saved up a grubstake, and then he intended to come back and start digging on his mine again. He'd done the same thing for six years.

Well, he asked me no questions about myself, and I gave him no information. I saw right off the bat that he was crazy to keep on gophering in his mine, so next morning I took fifty dollars out of my money belt and told him to go to town, buy a pack jack, and load him down with grub. Lordy, but that made a hit with him! He lit out like a kid going fishing.

Then three days passed, with me lying around that cabin alone—getting myself back to normal, as the fellow says. I'll never forget those days and nights. I never knew a man could suffer so. Over and over again, I pictured the scene between me and Ichabod Skuds in my shack in Whywurry—the shooting—how he had tried to kill me, as I knelt alongside of him on the trail; how I went panicky and nearly killed myself, escaping. And, suffer! Old Man Remorse sure drove the spurs in hard. I wished now that I'd paid Gordon's loan; that I'd settled on Ichabod's terms; that I'd done anything except shoot. I was a murderer—a fugitive—an outcast.

And on top of all this was the terrible thought that I'd lost Idabelle forever. Sort of paralyzed by what I'd done,

haunted and half mad to make my getaway, I'd neglected to think of poor little Idabelle that night. But, waiting there alone in Uncle Billy's cabin during those three days, I made up for it. I can't tell you everything that passed through my head, or exactly how I felt—it'd take too long, and you might laugh when you shouldn't. But if any man is heartbroken, it's me. I'd never see Idabelle again. And if I did, she wouldn't marry a murderer, much as she loved him. I shouldn't expect her to. And all those happy hours we spent together in her kitchen kept parading up and down, up and down, in my mind and——

Anyway, Uncle Billy returns from Silver City, driving a pinto jack rabbit with a small-sized mountain of provisions teetering on its back. I said a while ago that this old gold digger of the Painted Hills was wise as an owl. He's all that. I limp out to help him unpack, and the first thing I see when he flips the tarpaulin off the pack is a radio, a coil of wire and a flock of electric batteries. Uncle Billy gives me a little grin, sweet as you please.

"I got it dirt cheap. Good friend of mine—he bought a new one and let me have this one. All *you* have to pay is five dollars a month for a year. You have to have some amusement—a young fellow like you," he says.

I ain't got the heart to tell him what I think, and I'm feeling too safe in that cozy out-of-the-way cabin and not a bit anxious to leave it, to start crabbing about sixty dollars. I figure I'm getting off pretty easy. So, the radio becomes one of the family. There's a sort of eyedropper spring a few yards away in a clump of willows. Uncle Billy cuts a couple of branches for poles and strings the wire across the gulch.

And, as soon as we've had supper, he sits down and begins turning the dials, his bony hands trembling. He looked like an old burglar trying to open a safe. Then, coming from the loud speaker and breaking the heavy desert silence in ghostly tones:

"This is KPO, San Francisco," says a voice. "You are listening to Mr. Eduardo Abdo, the Arabian tenor. His next selection will be, 'O How I Miss You To-night.'"

Say, I don't know if you ever heard that song, but, if you have, you'll just about know how it hit me. And the way that Arabian tenor sang it would simply overwhelm you, as the fellow says—pleadinglike and sad, and beautiful as a prayer.

I couldn't stand it. Out of the cabin I go, all choked up and stand and think of Idabelle. I never was so heartbroken in my life.

AFTER a little, I hear a jazz band flying to it, and I go in, feeling gayer. Uncle Billy is dancing around. I light a cigarette. Somehow, I'm kind of glad we've got a radio. Then Uncle Billy goes to pawing over them dials again, and the next minute I hear a woman singing in the distance, growing lounder every second. And I'd swear it's Idabelle's voice. I hunt the outside again, lean against the cabin, and make up my mind that I'll chance the trip back to Whywurry in a couple of days or so. I've just got to see her to explain how I come to be a murderer.

"This is station KOWW, Walla Walla, Washington," the radio announces.

That pepped me up considerable. I lived in Walla Walla when I was a kid.

I mosey back into the shack, and Uncle Billy looks around at me and grins like a laughing hyena.

"You're just in time. They're going to sing, 'The Prisoner's Song,'" says he, making goo-goo eyes at me.

I wince a little.

"Well, what about it?" I ask him, cold as ice.

"Nothing—except, if you don't want to hear it, I'll tune her out. Maybe you'd rather have something like, 'Where's My Wandering Boy To-night?'"

It's one of those silent moments that comes after the radio announcer speaks. The fellow hadn't started singing yet, and I was just going to tell Uncle Billy to give us a little jazz instead, when I hear the clatter of horses' hoofs coming up the gulch, close by. The cabin has only got one door, facing the trail.

"Visitors!" exclaims Uncle Billy. He gives me a mysterious grin.

The Walla Walla baritone starts warbling "The Prisoner's Song." I begin to feel like I'm already in a condemned cell in San Quentin. The hoofs sound closer.

"Shut that damned thing off!" I whisper, whipping out my gun. I'm about as desperate as any crook you ever heard of.

But Uncle Billy is an old fox. He looks at me in surprise.

"What're you scared about, Mr. Ross?" says he. "You sure ain't killed anybody."

"I mustn't be seen! Do you understand?" As I speak, I step over and snap off the radio. The night turns still as the grave. Then a man hollers:

"Hullo, Billy!"

"It's all right, son," chuckles Uncle Billy. "That's a friend of mine, and he's harmless. He's prospecting down the valley and stops with me overnight on his way to town, once or twice a month, and we play crib together. You don't have to worry about him."

"You're dead sure about that, are you?" says I, looking holes through him. I'd have been suspicious of my own brother just then.

His old, faded-blue eyes kind of glued themselves on mine for a moment.

"You don't think I'd sell you out, lad, when you've stocked the cabin with grub and going to pay for that radio?" He said this like I'd hurt him.

It got me. I slammed my gun in its holster. The horse has stopped outside.

"No, sir, I don't. And, what's more, I'll take a chance on your friend. I'm pretty good at crib, myself." Then I grin, but I'm mighty anxious, let me tell you.

Before we could say anything more, there's a knock at the door.

"If you can't come in, stay out!" hollers Uncle Billy.

"I hear you, you old tarantula," laughs our visitor, and in he comes.

He's a big bird, chest a yard wide, iron-jawed, dressed for the sun and sagebrush, piercing inky eyes and eyebrows like awnings.

Uncle Billy sort of looks sick.

"Hullo, Billy! How're you percolating?" rumbles this new party.

"Fine—fine, Daniel. I—I could have sworn you were 'Tonopah Jake.' You know Tonopah—prospecting round Yellowjacket Spring? Have a seat. Had supper yet? Meet Mister Bacon, my partner. Bacon, this here is Sheriff Bennett, best scout in Silver City." That's how Uncle Billy introduces me.

I'M going to leave to your imagination how I felt—at that supreme moment, as the fellow says. Here, I'd been expecting to see a harmless friend of Uncle Billy, and in pops the very person I was hiding from! And, before I could've made up my mind what to do, even if I'd wanted to, the sheriff was glad-handing me.

"You've got a name good enough to eat, Mister Bacon. It's given me an appetite. I'll just sample your cooking, Billy. You've got a radio, I see. Wasn't that 'The Prisoner's Song,' I just heard somebody singing?"

Right then I was too much in the air to do a graceful fade-out. Maybe I might have sneaked out of the cabin, jumped on the sheriff's horse, and struck out. But where would I go? I wasn't familiar with the country—and Lord help the man who isn't dead sure of water on the desert! And I couldn't chance it into Silver City, hardly.

One thing I did settle on: I wouldn't be taken alive. If it came to a showdown, I'd shoot, much as I hated to do it. After that—well, I figured there'd be time enough to decide when the smoke cleared away.

So, I just sat and waited for Sheriff Bennett to make the first move. And, oh, how I blessed that radio! Uncle Billy started her going again, and the sheriff straddled a bench and did nothing but listen. And there I lolled on the other side of the table, my hand on my gun.

Pretty soon Uncle Billy sets the meal on the table—he slips me a sly wink—and the bloodhound of the law proceeds to devour it.

"It's a long time since I been out this

way," says he to the old man. "It's more than three years ago. Recollect when I came after your partner, Ichabod Skuds, on that charge of stealing horses?"

Uncle Billy lit his pipe and chuckled.

"Ichabod wasn't as straight as he might have been, I hear. A tough man for a partner, Daniel. He was too slick for your office, wasn't he, eh?"

"He was a great little cuss. By the way, where is he now? I haven't seen him around Silver City for some weeks."

"Why, the last I heard of him he was dead—got shot," said Uncle Billy, just like that.

I got the funniest feeling! I looked at the sheriff. He was eying old Uncle Billy, kind of skepticlike. And when I looked at Uncle Billy, there he was eying me. Of course, that attracted the sheriff's attention my way. I don't know how I looked or acted, but, believe me, I felt the zero hour had come, and my hand tightened on my gun, and a cold chill, like a sliver of ice, went sliding down my back.

The sheriff stared hard at me a moment. Then he screwed up one eye and frowned.

"So you killed him, eh?" says he.

That's as far as I let him get. I was on my feet in a flash, my gun covering him. I spring around the table, jerk his weapon from its holster, and then back, cat fashion, for the door.

Uncle Billy broke out in a wild titter.

"I was just kidding him, son. I didn't——" he began, scared to death.

"Keep your seats, gents. I'm shooting to-night," I warn them, and I didn't recognize my own voice.

The sheriff just sat there, holding his knife and fork, too surprised to say anything, and I slip out of the shack and shut the door after me. The moon isn't quite up yet, but it ain't what you'd call dark. I see Bennett's horse standing a couple of jumps away. But he's seen me, too. As I start toward him, he snorts and makes a break up the gulch.

I take after him. He's my forlorn hope. With him under me, I've got a slim chance of getting out of that cussed country; without him—well, it'd be only a matter of a few hours, as the doctor would say. The horse stops at last, but, just as I'm about to reach for his bridle, he spins around and goes flying past me down the gulch again.

Lordy, but that did sure put me up against it! I dassen't go back. I *had* to go on. Uncle Billy might have a gun, and the sheriff would borrow it and catch his horse, and the rest would be easy. So, I do the one and only thing that offers me life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—I begin playing hide and seek with Mister Sheriff in that hell waste.

Away I go over the hills, doing the same Marathon stunt I did a week or so before. And that big, double-breasted criminal chaser is hot on my trail. Once, I hear him barking half a mile off, trying to coax me to him:

"Hey, Bacon! I want to have a little talk with you. Where are you? Come on back——"

But I kept going all the harder, in the opposite direction.

ABOUT three miles from the shack I find a hiding place among some granite boulders on a hill. There's a big cluster of them, and I pick out a clean spot between two of them, from where I can keep a lookout up and down a gulch, striking due east and west, and the moon comes out to keep me company.

Well, sir, there I was again, up against it as badly as I'd been the night I dug out of Whywurry. The only thing in my favor was that I figured I could sneak back to the shack and get grub and water. Sheriff Bennett wouldn't stay there to wait for me. I felt pretty certain he'd think I'd head for Silver City. Besides, I wanted to go back and tell Uncle Billy just what I thought of him for tipping the sheriff off to me. You recollect the way he eyed me when he said Ichabod got killed.

And, as I sat there among the granite boulders, keeping a watch of the gulch and listening, I wondered and wondered how Uncle Billy could have found out that I'd shot Ichabod. I gave it up presently. One thing got clear in my mind and that was: I'd get revenge on

the old traitor. I'd load every pound of grub on the burro and drive off with it, and Uncle Billy McCroy could go and work for his grubstake, like he had intended doing before I came. And he'd have the radio on his hands, to boot.

Now, neighbor, take my advice and don't you ever kill anybody. It's darned poor exercise, and for a fellow like myself, who'd rather hang around in the kitchen with the girl he loves, it's awful embarrassing. Hour after hour passes, and there I sit out in the wide-open spaces, hiding like a coyote—the only difference being I can't bark. All the time, I'm anxious, my nerves on edge, and I'm desperate in a kind of sullen way. I've sworn I won't be taken alive. I'll never climb those thirteen steps, and I'll never rot in a cell. And I pray and pray that Sheriff Bennett doesn't find me, because I'd hate to have to shoot him.

It's a quarter to one by my watch when I get to my feet, all ready to start snooping back to the shack. I haven't heard a sound, and I convince myself that it's more than likely the sheriff has struck out for Silver City to get a posse together, as is usually done in such cases.

Then, suddenly! *Whang! Whang!* Two shots roar out a little distance up the gulch. Three or four more go ripping merrily through the night. I drop flat, like I'd stopped one of them, puzzled. I'm dead sure it can't be anybody else but Bennett. When it comes to persistence, he's a seventeen-jewel stemwinder, but what I don't savvy is how he'd found out where I was hiding. And along comes another hail of bullets. This time they spatter on the rocks right over my head. I hear his horse now, loping down the gulch, and another spatter of bullets. The horse stops. The next moment I'm listening to foosteps taking the hill on the run.

Right then I square off for the grand finale. I'm flattened out on the ground, like a bullfrog in a space between two big boulders, and with a six-shooter in each hand; one of them is the sheriff's. I cover the opening, and no man living could have taken me single-handed.

The shooting has quit, but the footsteps get louder and louder, clattering over the loose slide rock that covers the slope of the hill. The seconds drag by, and my nerve commences to evaporate. Much as I feel that I ought to, I just can't force myself to shoot Bennett. I haven't any quarrel with him. He's only doing his duty. As they say, I'm between hell and high water, when all of a sudden I happen to look up, and, hopping up the slope toward me, I get my first slant of the enemy.

The moon is bright as a street-corner arc light, and I see at a glance that that sawed-off figure ain't Sheriff Bennett's. There's only one such build of a man that I know of—it's haunted me enough that I ought to—Ichabod Skuds! And it *is* Ichabod! He's lost his hat, and I see his head is all bandaged up.

I rub my eyes, thinking I must be dreaming. But it's him, all right enough, and he's wearing those leather breeches I spoke about a while back, and light and heavy artillery fore and aft. I'm so overcome with joy, I could have fallen on his neck and wept. Up I jump, forgetting everything except that Ichabod Skuds is alive—that I'm not a murderer—that I can strike right back to Whywurry and Idabelle. Man, oh, man, what a grand and glorious feeling!

I Charleston out of my hiding place. I guess I'd have caught him in my arms and kissed him on the cheek, like the Frenchmen do. But just then he stops and looks back down the gulch and chuckles. That chuckle saved me funeral expenses. It froze me stiff, it was so devilish. I suddenly remember the horse I'd heard, and now I see it lying stretched out on the sandy bed of the gulch, and something moving beside it—a man trying to get up. Sheriff Bennett!

I stand petrified for a moment. Then I move in, gripping my persuaders. He's maybe ten long paces away from me. I snarl at him:

"Stick 'em up, Skuds, before I hand you the last installment with interest."

He spun around like a top—shooting. A bullet nipped a neat little half moon out of my right ear, and another tickled me under the arm. I'd turned loose by now, pumping it to him. Emptying my

gats, I dived back of a heap of rocks, loading up like a professional killer.

Ichabod stopped firing, too. I heard him scrambling for cover, caught a glimpse of him, and got him in the leg. He drops, cursing something fierce, sliding downhill. And, before he could get himself together again, I'm standing over him, booting the guns out of his hands.

"You insect! Too bad I didn't finish you in the first place," says I to him—and to this day I wish I had.

WELL, to taper off this yarn: I find that Sheriff Bennett only took a header when Ichabod shot his horse out from under him. He's still a speck groggy, as I join him, packing my broken-legged prisoner on my back. Between me and Bennett, we get him to the shack around four in the morning, and Uncle Billy, who's fallen asleep over the radio, holds a secret confab with the sheriff. Pretty soon the old fellow strikes out on the burro for Silver City, to notify the deputies to bring saddle horses, so Bennett informs me. I can't see what's secret about that.

"What's our good friend, Mr. Skuds, done?" I ask the sheriff.

"Oh, just plain hoss thief. I came out here thinking he'd head for his old partner's," says he, offhand.

Anyway, deputies came before noon, and Bennett and Ichabod depart for the calaboose. But Uncle Billy ain't returned. The hours pass, and still no Uncle Billy. It gets hot as blue blazes. But—happy! Say, I was as happy as if I'd had good sense. Soon as that old desert rat arrived, I intended giving him sixty dollars to buy that radio, and several months' grubstake to boot. I ain't quit staking him to this day.

It's just turning dark, and by twisting those radio knobs this way and that I get the tail end of a band playing, and then a sociable chap calls out:

"This is KSMR, Santa Maria, California. Special news announcement: Word has been received from the Mojave Desert, town of Silver City, of the capture last night of Ichabod Skuds, alleged murderer, for whom posses have been scouring San Buenaventura County for several days. Skuds surrendered only after a desperate battle, in which Sheriff Bennett narrowly escaped death.

"Following a quarrel over money matters with Silas Gordon, in Camp Whywurry, Skuds is said to have shot the latter. The strange disappearance of Dave Ross, a young prospector, who had had trouble with Skuds, prior to the death of Gordon, was cleared up with the fugitive's capture. By an odd coincidence, young Ross, the sweetheart of Gordon's only daughter, was in the neighborhood when the battle between the sheriff and the alleged slayer began and forced the man's surrender. The next number on our program this evening——"

I sat stupefied, staring at the loud speaker, as if I was looking at a ghost. Poor old Gordon dead—murdered—by Skuds! Idabelle's dad killed! And Idabelle—— I got to my feet like a madman. I saw now why Bennett didn't tell me the truth about Skuds' arrest. He was afraid I'd kill the little cur. And just about then, while I was quivering all over with fury, I hear a footstep back of me, and:

"Dave! Oh, Dave!"

It's Idabelle! She springs through the open door, crying like her heart would break. I grab her. Glad? I'll say!

You see, Uncle Billy, good old scout that he is, has known all about everything. I'd jabbered it out in my delirium. The day he'd gone to town after grub, he'd found out that I hadn't killed Ichabod, but, instead, that Ichabod had killed Gordon. Anyhow, being more or less romantic and wanting to give me a pleasant surprise—and he'd like to keep the radio, I imagine—why, he wires Idabelle to come, and he waits in Silver City for her, after notifying the deputies.

And, neighbor, as I stand there holding her in my arms, comforting her—there in the silence of that funny, rickety rock cabin in the lonely heart of the Painted Hills, I hear a man's voice coming out of that loud speaker, all the way from Santa Maria—a hundred miles or more across the Mojave—singing as beautiful as I've ever heard, "The End of a Perfect Day."

Hoot Owl Swamp

By Harris Dickson

Author of "The Rousing of Wes Hall," "Any Color, So It's Red," Etc.

Judge Fearing became very curious when he saw a fashionably dressed stranger entering, in a perfectly familiar manner, Hoot Owl Swamp, the God-forsaken abode of derelicts and refugees. By means of his negro servant, Jasper, and a little luck, the Judge finally made an interesting discovery.

QUEER things happened in that labyrinth of lagoon and wilderness so vaguely known as "Hoot Owl Swamp." Tragedy lurked in the silences, and Comedy cut its capers, of which plantation folk knew nothing. For they who tilled the lands around it, walked forevermore as strangers to a world upon whose denizens the sunlight rarely shone. To Hoot Owl Swamp fled the absconder, the murderer, the highwayman, and harmless eccentrics, who found content in solitude. By night, to some isolated store would stride a grizzled hermit, bartering his pelts for powder and lead, for tobacco, coffee, and fishhooks. These men were not garrulous. They kept still tongues, and the grim, gray recesses which sheltered them were even more discreet.

Crime slunk alone into those mysterious depths, where law must parade in force. An occasional posse, representing the peace and dignity of Mississippi, blundered through its jungles, beating the lairs of bear and deer, but never finding their man; for Hoot Owl betrayed no refugee who claimed its sanctuary. Perhaps a prowling hunter from the city might stumble upon a shack, or chance to see a haze of thin upcurling smoke. Then it were wise for him to shut his eyes and turn elsewhere.

Sinister figures at times dodged into this seclusion, where no writ of extradition ran, but none more peculiar than a certain top-hatted stranger of whom Judge Ensor Fearing caught a glimpse.

It was a blazing afternoon, hotter even than the place that judge mentioned. The florid old planter had been riding across Wofford's field, and he halted his horse to rest beneath the shade of a tree.

The planter-judge wore no coat, for he could scarcely endure his scorching skin. He removed a white cork helmet and was mopping his red face, when over the tops of a sassafras thicket he noticed a stretch of the scenic highway —smooth, brown, and sizzling in the heat. Suddenly a speeding limousine appeared from the north, came in a rush, and stopped short—stopped like a bronco pony that braces all four legs at the brink of a precipice.

THE negro chauffeur glanced backward, apparently to make sure that the road was deserted. Then, to Judge Fearing's astonishment, old black Jasper stepped cautiously from the car, *his* Jasper, known far and wide as "Judge Fearing's Jasper," member of the firm of "Jedge and Jasper." To any other white man the mere fact of Jasper emerging from an auto at a lonely place in the road would have been *prima facie* evidence of guilt. And well did Judge Fearing know it. In his young days, as a lawyer, he'd saved Jasper too often—knew enough assorted devilment to hang him forty-seven times. That's why Jasper went straight with the judge and made him a good and faithful servant.

All of which flashed across the planter's mind somewhat quicker than instantaneously, in that instant when he had opened his mouth to give Jasper a yell, but the negro's air of secrecy hushed him. Then a shiny top hat thrust itself from the limousine, a black cutaway coat appeared, gray trousers—a white man, carrying a gold-headed cane, and gloves.

The limousine had scarcely paused until its passengers alighted, then leaped forward, and vanished at a sixty-mile clip. It left old Jasper and the white man standing in the road, where they exchanged only a word or two before the stranger nodded and dived into the woods.

Another moment and the road was empty, for Jasper had trudged on afoot.

"Who the devil is *he?*" Judge Fearing wondered, but the courtesies, and the safety of Hoot Owl Swamp forbade investigation.

At that spot the Scenic Highway skirts a dense wood, just where Double S Bayou approaches within a few steps, completely hidden by a canebrake. Only those familiar with the locality could know that the bayou ran so close, or know that it afforded the quickest route to Hoot Owl Swamp. So it puzzled Judge Fearing to see this stranger, plainly a Northern man, wave casual farewell to Jasper and plunge into the canebrake, with the certainty of a pathwise possum traveling to his hole.

Among all the motley characters in Hoot Owl, this specimen did not seem to fit. He was no hunter or fisherman; nor yet a fugitive newly arrived. Suddenly the judge thought of his motor boat, which lay moored in Double S, not a dozen yards away.

The stranger was following the path toward it, and its owner momentarily expected to hear him crank his engine.

No *chug-chug* of a propeller came up from Double S. He heard nothing, but he saw several things. Where the stagnant bayou meanders from the forest, it makes a sharp curve through open fields, before hiding itself again in the canebrake. There its snakelike coil was visible. And there Judge Fearing glimpsed a flying dugout, the most silent, swift, and trickiest of crafts. The stranger had taken off his coat and paddled with the dexterity of a seasoned swamper. For one flashing instant a glint of sunshine sparkled on his hat. Then he was gone.

All of human curiosity is not put up in female packages. The judge tingled, as his hot gray mare went jogging homeward, yet even his experience at criminal law could form no theory which accounted for such a man in such a place. Of course, old Jasper might tell him, but at supper that tight-lipped mummy waited on Mrs. Fearing and the girls with the inscrutable countenance of a Chinese idol. After supper the judge asked him no direct questions; for, unless Jasper volunteered to tattle on his some-time comrades of the swamp, no amount of cross-examination could extract the truth from such an artful liar. Upon a wholly innocent occasion, Jasper would have been prompt to mention

that a white gentleman had given him a lift on the road from town, and he would have bragged of the fine green limousine that fetched him home. But Jasper never chirped—not once. There the riddle simmered for three weeks, during which time the inquisitive judge failed to pick up a trail or a clew.

THE most scientific logician could never have foreseen a connection between Ensor Fearing's dinner jacket and a silk-hatted Yankee who had vanished into Hoot Owl. Even the judge did not suspect that one would lead to the other, when his wife went burrowing into the bottom of a cedar chest.

For more than thirty-five years Ensor Fearing had served his term of penal servitude in dress clothes, had stood around at tea parties, balancing a cup and saucer in one hand, a plate of salad in the other, struggling to eat gracefully, to be witty and polite. He'd done his time at cotillions, at progressive euchres, at bridge penances. That was in the days of his slim young saplinghood, before he began to carry weight for age, before he acquired a wife, two grown daughters, a paunch, and what might be called discretion. Now he'd quit—had taken refuge in voluntary social solitude. Ensor Fearing was done. From being forced to go out, he'd got sore at the social system—hysterically sore. Like a baby with a boil, the judge would scream if any hostess pointed her finger at him.

Such was the aggravated inflammation of his mind when Mrs. Fearing exhumed a long-buried Tuxedo and set in a deep V at the back of the vest, so the straining buttons could meet in front of the judge's rotunda.

"Here, Ensor," she said, entering his room and smiling as sweetly as a grand inquisitor, as she laid all the habiliments of torture upon his bed. "Here, Ensor. You'll wear these to-morrow night when the Seamans arrive. They'll be here over Sunday."

In Jasper's countenance of dismay, two big white eyes batted in terror, as they followed Mrs. Fearing from the room.

"Jedge," the negro blurted out, "you reckin ole miss is aimin' to make me wear dem patten-leather shoes? Dey blisters my feets."

THE alarm tinkled only once before Ensor Fearing sprang out of bed and strangled it. Remorselessly he smothered the escape of any sound, while the clock struggled in his grasp and throbbed and died. Having silenced its death rattle, the planter pattered in his bare feet to his window and glanced upward at the sky. It was an intensely dark night—clear, windless, and ideal for his purpose.

"Fine!" he muttered. "Three thirty." That was the hour which the clock showed.

Swiftly the judge dressed, listening like a burglar for any noise that might threaten from his wife's room. He chuckled at his shrewdness in avoiding argument.

Wearing his corduroys and in his stocking feet, carrying a pair of mud boots, Fearing tiptoed through the blackness of a wide hallway, holding his breath until he reached the bottom step outside, where he sat down and laced on his boots. Nobody had seen him—nobody had questioned where he intended to go, or when he expected to return. Free as a marauding panther, his formless figure slunk into the night.

Through such intense darkness he could barely discern the highway. Only by a hunter's instinct did he locate the path which led to his motor boat. Having gained the bayou's edge, he could see nothing, absolutely nothing, until within arm's length of a shrouded bulk that uprose from its seat upon a log. Before him stood a gibbous, unspeaking shape, and the judge accosted it.

"Jasper, is everything fixed?"

"Yas, jedge. Git in."

These veteran campaigners did little talking. Jasper unwound a rope from its stump, while his boss settled himself in the motor boat and took the wheel. The propeller revolved. An unwilling skiff, that was towed astern, hung back like a balky mule, jerked a time or two, then straightened out obediently, and followed.

Keen air tingled in the judge's nostrils. The exhilaration of liberty tautened every muscle. He was going to Hoot Owl, where nobody wore dress suits. And Jasper snickered at his fortunate escape from patent-leather abominations.

On they went, through the narrow, tortuous bayou, whirling this way and that, like a girl in a waltz. Half an hour of skillful steering. The heavens grew lighter, their crooked bayou widened; then the gallant little boat dashed out into open water—Lake Perdu.

Lake Perdu, with mists of morn, that shimmered like a bridal veil, and a flush in the east, rosy as the face beneath the veil. The judge felt friskier than a three year old, and he shouted, just because he wanted to shout:

"Jasper, the world is ours! Which way shall we go?"

"Better try dem fish at Willer Slough. An' dere's plenty squirrels over on de P'int."

Diagonally across Lake Perdu, the judge held his course, with Jasper squatting in the boat, getting their oil stove ready. Dawn began to broaden. Distorted white snags uprose above the water, ghastly as frozen corpses of the damned. The lake lay utterly still, sentineled by somber cypress trees, with venerable beards, the ancient guardsmen of Hoot Owl Swamp.

On a dry promontory across the lake, Jasper set up his stove, grease sizzled in the skillet, and a coffeepot murmured its content. The judge rigged his rod and tried a few experimental casts. It thrilled the angler's soul to watch his long, thin line go rushing out with a whir, to mark his lure drop so accurately beside a snag, and to hear the clicking of the reel.

"What bait, Jasper?" he called. "Dowagiac? Spinner?"

"Tease 'em fust wid yo' spinner. Dey'll grab anything dis mornin'. Look yonder."

Jasper's skinny finger pointed to an inlet, where a sluggish bayou entered the lake. The water sparkled with flying minnows, scintillating like showers of diamonds flung along its surface.

"Look, jedge! Barfish! But yo' coffee's ready, suh."

Things happened because of that dinner coat, since the judge got stampeded and went fishing. Otherwise, he and Jasper might not have been sitting on a log at daylight, enjoying their breakfast, while the confidential atmosphere loosened Jasper's tongue. In Hoot Owl itself, he might talk of swamp affairs; out of it, never. To him this fastness was a club, a lodge of whose doings he must not gabble on the streets. The reticent negro was munching a slice of bacon, when he began to chuckle: "Jedge, I see *De Scum* is gone."

"The Scum?"

"Yas, suh. Shanty boat what used to be tied to dat big white snag down yonder—dat snag wid two prongs. Huh! Mr. Scummer was 'bleeged to move atter what tuk place in town."

WITHOUT betraying his too eager curiosity, the judge studied that special snag to which a boat had once been moored, until Jasper laughed and spoke again:

"Jedge, does you 'member dat Saddy, three weeks ago, when I staid all day in town?"

"Yes."

"Well, I 'tended de lawsuit. A feller named 'Meddlesome Mattie' swore out his affidavy agin' Mr. Scummer, fer salt an' battle."

"Yes?" The judge blew upon his coffee and listened.

"Afore he moved to Hoot Owl, Scummer used to live over yonder in White River Swamp, on de Arkansaw side. Dat's where I fust knowed Scummer."

"Scummer?" the judge repeated.

"Dat's all de name he got. An' he mought not have dat much of a name, ef twa'n't painted in big letters on his shanty boat, '*De Scum*.' So folks calls him Scummer, which do tol'able well, 'cause mighty few pussons gits nigh enough to call him anything.

"One day whilst I was huntin' on White River, I run across Mr. Scummer, tuk down sick in his boat, an' tarried dere to nuss him. He wouldn't 'low me to go fer nary doctor. Jedge, I been

browsin' 'mongst dese swamps sence I was knee-high to a hoppergrass, but I ain't never seed nary boat like hisn. It looked powerful ratty on de outside, but inside she was fixed up nice. Huh! He had nigh as many books as what you got, an' he done sot up a forge on de inside. Had a workbench where he was continual makin' things."

"Pshaw!" scoffed the criminal-lawyer mind. "He was making moonshine."

"No, sah, jedge, he wa'n't 'stillin' no whisky. He never had no booze, 'cause when Scummer sont me to Arkansaw City, he gimme fifty dollars to buy rations, an' 'spressly to buy a quart o' *good* licker, ef I could find any what wa'n't pizen."

"Gave you *fifty* dollars? Jasper, that must have been counterfeit money."

"No, sirree bob! Dat was *honest* money. I got a twenty-dollar bill changed at de bank, an' dey knows what's what. Mr. Scummer had a tin box hid in de ceilin', an', bein' too sick to git up hisself, he axed me to reach it fer him. Den he gimme two twenties an' a ten to buy things wid."

"Buy what?"

"Medicine an' rations. Mr. Scummer sat on his bunk an' writ a list—blue overalls, canned soup, light bread, butter, tea, an' some o' dese frogstools what comes in a can."

"Mushrooms?"

"Dunno, suh. He claims dat dey was fine, scrambled wid eggs. An' some little fishes in bottles, same as sardines, all curled up."

"Do you mean anchovies?" The two old gossips were having a bully time, talking about their neighbor.

"Mebbe so," Jasper answered doubtfully. "Anyway, I fotch dis grub an' cooked fer him nigh three weeks, ontil he got well. Den he paid me fifty dollars fer my ownself."

"Fifty more? But, Jasper"—again the criminal-lawyer mind—"how did a fisherman happen to have so much cash?"

"Dat wa'n't none o' my bizness, jedge. White River folks is sorter skittish 'bout mentionin' where dey gits deir money. 'Cose I was mighty close 'quainted wid Mr. Scummer; yit when he fust showed hisself at cote, dat Saddy, three weeks ago, all dressed up, I never knowed him. Yas, suh, Scummer was dolled up finer'n a sore finger, wid his stovepipe hat an' gole walkin' stick."

"What sort of looking man is he?"

"Lookin' man? In de woods he's scraggly, suh—scraggly, wid tangled hair an' whiskers an' sharp, black eyes. Wears galluses an' brogans."

"What age?"

"Age? Huh! Dat white man ain't got no age. He's jest got hair an' whiskers."

"All right," the judge laughed. "Go ahead. What were you fixing to tell about the lawsuit?"

"Huh! It 'stounded me. Ef anybody had axed Mr. Scummer what was the very last thing he 'spected to have, Scummer would sholy specify a lawsuit. Folks on White River is sot in deir notions. Dey argufies dat by not pesterin' de cotehouse, cotehouse people ain't got no right to meddle wid dem. Dey tends to deir own bizness an' settles deir own squabbles widout nary constable.

"All dis tanglement riz up when Matt Judson—dey calls him Meddlesome Mattie—when Matt Judson come down here fishin' in de lake an' jest happened to spy *De Scum*. Of co'se, I didn't see dis my ownself, but I knows by hearin' Matt tell de constable in town. Huh! Matt went promenadin' roun' town mighty biggety, proclaimin' 'bout how he seen Scummer's shanty boat an' couldn't figger what right dat Arkansaw feller had to be trappin' on our side o' de river. Y'onderstan', jedge, Meddlesome Mattie is got mo' curiosity dan a pet coon, an' craves to diskiver.

"So dat Saddy evenin', afore de lawsuit come up, I hung aroun' de justice cote, listenin', whilst Matt kept shootin' off his mouf. An' from knowin' how meddlesome he was, an' knowin' Scummer so well, I could shut bofe eyes an' see how things happened. Fust Matt, he glimpses *De Scum*, wid a pair o' blue overalls settin' on de gunwale. Den he couldn't rest 'til he pulls up in his skiff, beggin' Scummer fer a chaw o' tobacker, an' he started to climb aboard. But

Scummer throwed de tobacker into his skiff an' warned Matt to keep off. Den I jest 'magined to myself how Matt hung aroun' an' hung aroun' dat shanty boat, makin' all manner o' excuses to peep inside. Matt's a feller what won't take no hint; you got to keep swattin' Matt off, same as a skeeter, ontil Scummer got peevish.

"Now, ef Matt had been on White River, he wouldn't dare ack no sech behavior, but he figgered dat Scummer mought be skeered to swat him in Miss'ippi, where lawyers growed so thick on ev'y gourd vine. Anyhow, Mattie kept pullin' his skiff from one side de shanty boat to de other, ontil time arrived for Scummer to go away an' look after his traps. Dat's when Scummer notified Matt to leave plumb out o' dat neighborhood, which Matt would 'a' did, ef he had any gumption. But, bein' a idiot fool, Matt 'lowed to play a trick. 'So long, Scummer,' he wave good-by. 'Reckin I'll be travelin' home.' Wid dem words, Matt pulled his skiff 'round dis very p'int, where we's settin' at, an' hides. Dere he waits, ontil Scummer shet down de winders an' locked his boat real careful, den went paddlin' off in his dugout an' vanished 'round dat bend yonder. Shucks, jedge, dat's when Mattie cornsiders hisself almighty smart, an' dat's where he showed his ignorance. 'Cause Scummer had already saw clean through him an' never went no ways, befo' he run his dugout ashore, an' come creepin' back on foot.

DERE was Mattie, climbin' up on de side de shanty boat. An' Scummer kotched him hangin' to de roof, wid a toenail holt on de gunwale, strivin' to open a winder. 'Cose Mattie never bragged none 'bout how he squawked, when Scummer snatched him in de lake, wid a pair o' blue overalls straddlewise his neck. Mattie disputes dat bofe of 'em fell in accidental, an' complains to de constable dat, whilst he was spittin' up so much water dat he couldn't 'fend hisself, Scummer broke a pole an' wore him to a frazzle. His 'pearance sho did prove it. Somebody had give Matt a turrible larrupin; he was teetotally tore up, legs an' arms all crisscrossed wid red an' white and blue whelps.

"Atter Scummer dumped Matt back in his skiff, dat ended it. Mr. Scummer had done did his do an' wa'n't 'spectin' nothin' more, onless Matt tuk a shot at him from de bushes. Dat's why it s'prised Scummer so bad when two constables showed up next day at his boat to fotch him notice of a lawsuit. An', believe me, jedge, dem constables tuk p'ticular pains to travel down de middle o' dis lake, kickin' up all de racket dey could wid a gasoline boat, so Scummer wouldn't make nary mistake an' plug 'em fer Mattie.

"'Hello de boat! Hello! Hello!' dey hollered, an' kep' hollerin' from a long ways off. Den, when Scummer's bushy whiskers stuck out from his door, dey talked nice to pacify him, afore dey reemarked 'bout 'zirin' him at cote fer salt an' battle on de pusson o' one Matt Judson. 'You better travel 'long wid us,' dey 'spress deirself. 'Dis gasoline boat will save you a long walk, fer yo' case is comin' up to-morrer evenin' at three o'clock.'

"Den Scummer axed 'em how much cash bond he could give to keep from sleepin' in jail. Jest de minit he speak dat word 'cash,' bofe dem constables bust out laffin', an' guessed dat twenty-five dollars would be plenty, 'cause Matt Judson's ontire hide wa'n't wuth no more'n twenty-five. So Scummer ducked back into his boat an' come out wid clean new money. 'There you are, gents;' he say. 'I'll 'tend yo' cote promptly at three o'clock to-morrer evenin'.'

"'All O. K.,' dey 'ply back, grabbed de cash, an' started deir engine. Huh! 'Twa'n't no two happier men in all dis world at gittin' away wid twenty-five dollars, an' no shootin'.

"So, when Saddy evenin' rolled aroun', I heard 'em 'formin' de magistrate dat Scummer wa'n't comin', an' dey mought as well fine him sufficient to kill de bill. Dat sholy was sweet news to Mattie; he perked up mightily at dem tidin's dat Scummer wa'n't comin', made his big talk, an' watched de clock in front o' de drug store ontil it got five minutes

to three. Down de road, as far as anybody could see, dere wa'n't no sign o' blue overalls an' bushy whiskers. So Mattie pranced aroun', braggin' his brags dat Scummer was skeered to show up on 'count o' what Mattie would do to him. At de same time, whilst Mattie was poppin' off steam, a ottermobile stopped in front o' de drug store, wid a darky driver, an' a strange white gent'man on de back seat. Ev'body figgered dat he must be one o' dem toorers from up Norf, what don't belong around here. Powerful stylish man. I ain't never seed nobody rigged up like he was rigged, 'cept dat time when President Roosevelt come to Vicksburg, an' white folks had de speakin'. Lordee, jedge, on *dat* day you could smell moth balls a mile off, yes, suh."

AT de very fust glimpse o' dat man, when he stepped out o' his car, he bothered me, 'cause I had seed him befo', but he done 'scaped my 'membrance. He stood right still a minute, kinder listenin' to Mattie's big talk, smilin', den walked into de drug store an' bought some fo'-bit seegyars. Exactly when de clock was strikin' three, he marches out again, wid his gole-headed walkin' stick, an' looked Mattie square in de eye. Jedge, does you 'member dat Yankee professor what went projeckin' around dese mud holes fer a while, studyin' doodlebugs and muskeeters? Well, suh, dis stranger talked jest proper as him, as' say to Matt, 'Yo' name is Matthew Judson, I believe.'

"'Yas, suh—yas, suh!'

"Den Mattie showed a heap mo' 'stonishment when de stranger inquire: 'Are you the man who had me arrested?'

"'No, suh, not me.' Mattie's mouf flew wide open, an' he 'treated back-'ards.

"'But,' de stranger 'sisted, 'I was informed that you had sworn out an affidavit charging me with assault?' Whilst he was talkin' so prissy, I kept studyin' dat man. Where *is* I seed him? Den all of a sudden I knowed, but couldn't skacely believe it was Scummer hisself, wid his hair cut off, an' shaved clean, pink as a little baby. Mattie didn't reec*og*nize him at all, an' kept on denyin':

"'Twa'n't me, mister. I ain't swore *nothin'* agin' you. Never seen you befo'.'

"'You are *perfectly* sure?' Scummer pointed his gole-headed cane at Mattie. 'Absolutely *certain* that you never saw me befo'?'

"'No, suh—no, suh—no, suh,' Mattie kept on repeatin'.

"'Then you did *not* make an affidavit that I had assaulted you?'

"'No, suh, mister. You never hit me nary lick in yo' whole life.'

"'Very good,' Scummer remarked. 'So I have driven all this distance for nothing?'

"By dat time, jedge, I done got choked wid laugh, watchin' dem white fellers squint so hard at Scummer, whilst he step back into his ottermobile, an' slammed de door wid a bang, like he was pestered. Huh! Dem constables' eyes bulged out, 'cause dey begins to see how dat 'twas Scummer his ownself. So Scummer leaned out de winder an' motioned 'em to him: 'Boys,' he whisper, 'you can split up my twenty-five. I prefer not to be annoyed.'

"Nacherly it suited dem constables to split de money, an' Scummer give me a wink to git in de car wid him. Den we whirled around an' hit de road fer home."

After a period of silence, and seeing that the negro had finished, Judge Fearing inquired:

"What became of Scummer?"

"He drapped out o' de ottermobile at yo' landin' an' paddled back in his dugout. You see, jedge," old Jasper explained, 'todes de last, Mister Scummer got oneasy at showin' hisself so public."

The cup of coffee had grown cold in Fearing's hand, as he sat listening, and remarked:

"Jasper, I'd like to see that chap. Who do you think he is?"

"Shucks, jedge, nobody ain't never goin' to know who Scummer is. An' you ain't goin' to see him onless he tells you whar to look. Den more'n likely you'll go rootin' up some place whar he ain't at. You mought as well quit studyin'

'bout Scummer an' try to catch some barfish."

Long familiarity told Judge Fearing that he was at the end of Jasper's confidences. Yes, he might as well try the fish.

THE philosophies of the world are formed by fishermen, its great discoveries made by men of angling instincts. To meditate upon a cork that bobbles among the ripples, stimulates their quiet clarity of thought and sends unfettered imagination exploring the riddles of the universe. The earth *does* move, as Galileo reasoned, after observing the shadow of a snag go lengthening across the lake. The law of gravity burst upon Newton as he noted how his sinkers dropped into the limpid depths. And gentle currents flowing around his boat first suggested to Harvey the circulation of the blood.

Old Jasper paddled their skiff, silent as a creeping mist. At the prow stood Judge Fearing, tall, muscular, casting a skillful line. In came the tossing, fighting barfish, the silver beauties. Angling is not a loquacious occupation. Neither of them talked. The judge thought, trying to puzzle out the problem of Mr. Scummer.

About ten o'clock he reeled in and remarked:

"We've got enough fish for dinner. Now I'll shoot some squirrels and make a stew."

The happy idea of an outing is not to work too much, but to dawdle around camp, to swap yarns, to lie beneath the trees and forget about clocks. So Jasper beached their skiff. Up the steep bank Judge Fearing scrambled, carrying a shotgun and a roll of newspapers. He sought a narrow bayou which went wriggling into the jungle. The pecan trees were alive with squirrels.

"Jasper, get your fire ready," he called and pressed into the brushwood, with eyes lifted to the treetops; yet his feet seemed to have eyes of their own, avoiding the rustle of a bush or the snapping of a twig.

For some minutes Jasper listened and listened, but heard no crack of a gun. Then the judge burst angrily through the brush.

"Jasper, this darn thing is broke."

As an expert on firearms, Jasper examined the weapon and was fumbling at its lock, when Judge Fearing bent over him and whispered:

"I saw his shanty boat—*The Scum*—in there," with a barely perceptible nod.

"Huh!" Jasper chuckled. "Scummer's done hid hisself inside dis slough. Did you see him?"

"No. I don't like to slip up on any man without warning."

"Shucks! He done seen us long ago. Jedge, dis gun sho won't operate. But Scummer kin fix it."

"Do you think so?"

"I *knows*. He mends plow p'ints or watches—or anything in between."

Then the judge remembered what Jasper had told him of Scummer's forge and workbench, where he tinkered with all manner of contraptions.

"Very good," the judge agreed. "Would you mind asking him?"

"Sholy, suh. Odd jobs tickle Scummer. Jest foller me."

As the better part of valor, Judge Fearing fell in behind. After breasting through a network of briers and swamp vines, they came to a bayou where the boat lay moored, a drab, weather-beaten craft, concealed by overhanging branches of an oak. At a prudent distance Jasper stopped and shouted:

"Hello! Hello, Mr. Scummer!"

Immediately a voice answered from within: "Come on, Jasper. Bring Judge Fearing."

"Dere, now," the negro said and waggled his wise old head, "I tole you so. He knowed who was here."

As they approached the jealously secreted boat, a tattered curtain was drawn across its window, then a rough-whiskered man came stooping through the doorway and shut it behind him.

"Incredible!" thought Judge Fearing. "*That* cannot be the silk-hatted stranger."

Three weeks growth of stubbly beard now covered Scummer's face, black, bristly, belligerent. Yet the recluse seemed in no unamiable humor.

"Mr. Scummer," Jasper wasted not a word, "jedge's gun is busted."

WITHOUT a syllable, Scummer took the weapon; and, when he turned, Judge Fearing eyed him half amusedly from the rear, faded blue overalls with white suspenders crossing his shoulders like a huge X, slouchy gait, mud-caked brogans that shuffled along the gangplank to his boat. A true swamper, unkempt, lazy, utterly careless he appeared; but not so careless that Scummer neglected to close the door.

After some few moments, the overalls returned, bringing the gun, screw driver, pair of tweezers, and a lap cloth. Sitting on a log, with Jasper and the planter marveling at his skill, the accomplished artisan dismembered Judge Fearing's gunlock, and removed an infinitesimal spring, so tiny, so hairlike, that they were not able to distinguish just what it was.

"See! It's broken," he said. "Got to draw the wire and temper a new spring. Take two hours." With which he shambled back to his boat. Then they heard him start the forge.

Two hours. Good! Judge Ensor Fearing was exactly that kind of a fisherman. He loved the woods and the streams and the idleness; he didn't care a rap whether he caught or killed anything. After fetching his roll of New York Sunday papers, he wallowed down, flat on his back, and skimmed their headlines, none of which thrilled him. Presently he rose, stretched himself, and left his papers, to go wandering beside the water and watch the turtles sunning on their logs.

After a while he noticed Scummer emerge from the boat and seat himself beside the abandoned newspaper. The fisherman's manner gave a quick impression that the Sunday metropolitan paper was not wholly unfamiliar. Apparently Scummer was reading, waiting until the gun spring got its temper. Then Fearing caught his low exclamation, a startled, triumphant exclamation, instantly suppressed. The judge pretended not to hear, but saw that Scummer was now absorbed, reading intently, then sprang to his feet and flung down the paper. The swamper did not shamble nor slouch, but strode back to his boat with head erect, as a man of decision who had found himself.

"He read something in that paper!" Judge Fearing felt sure and excited, but forced himself to wait. He tried to appear nonchalant, to ease down negligently and take up the paper again. His fingers trembled, as he searched. Ah! Here it is: "Echo of a Famous Disappearance." Half a page, with photographs of the man and a woman. Breathlessly the judge read it through, with cautious glances at the shanty-boat window, behind which he could hear the tapping on Scummer's anvil.

For an amiable, easy-going person, the judge could also be crafty. He rolled over, gathered up his paper, and went strolling toward the fire, where Jasper was busy cooking their dinner.

"Look! That picture!" Judge Fearing thrust the supplement under Jasper's nose. "Do you know him?"

"Scummer!" The negro's eyes popped wide. "Ugh! Ugh! Is he gone *plumb* crazy? Printin' his bizness in de newspaper?"

"Sit down. *Now* I'll tell you who your friend is."

The two old cronies, white and black, sat with their heads close together, on a log, as Judge Fearing pointed to the picture of a woman and began:

"See that lady? Last Thursday she died in New York City. Her death reminded the editor of a husband who disappeared. Her name was Madge Kane. Seven years ago she married Francis P. Kane, which is Scummer's real name. He was a famous engineer all over the world, mining adviser to the Emperor of China, helped to build a British railroad through Africa. Africa is the country that he prefers, where he made his fortune and did his big hunting. His friends always believed that Scummer would one day return to Africa; and he might have gone back if he had not married. People said that Madge was bad; and after a couple of years Scummer felt certain that she only wanted his money. He *knew* that she was bad, but

could not prove it, and failed to get a divorce. Then his wife moved West, and sued him for an enormous amount of alimony."

"Ugh! Ugh!" Jasper grunted.

"Scummer's rich. The woman had no trouble in hiring a swarm of lawyers who expected to make him pay them. At their greediness, the husband got bull-headed and resolved that he would never pay one cent to Madge or to her attorneys. So, when a Western court gave judgment against him, they couldn't find Scummer to collect it. He had disappeared—gone. Neither could Madge's lawyers locate a dime's worth of all the property that he had, for Scummer had sold everything and taken the cash. Remember, Jasper, that he's a prominent man, a celebrated man; has friends. Yet nobody knew where he went, except from hints that he had probably gone hunting in Africa. Madge's lawyers set detectives on his supposed trail; newspapers were full of his disappearance. Reporters followed every clew, searched the African jungles, ransacked the world, but never found Mr. Scummer."

"Co'se not," Jasper snickered, " 'cause durin' dat time I never told nobody I was 'tendin' him in his shanty boat on White River."

"Now the case has ended. Madge is dead. Scummer can go where he pleases, and he did not pay that woman or her lawyers one single penny."

"Ugh! I glories in his spunk," Jasper applauded. "One time a ooman got holt o' me, an'—— Sh! Sh!"

Their whispering hushed, for Scummer's fierce black eyes and bristling beard were coming toward them, with a gun in his hand.

"It's all right now, sir." The recluse spoke excellent English and dismissed that subject, as he turned to the negro. "Jasper, you have rendered me a valuable service. Once you were extremely kind in Arkansas. I am leaving here. Judge Fearing will bear witness that I give you my boat, with everything in it, and this."

After thrusting something into Jasper's hand, Scummer turned, and his blue overalls strode crashing through the brushwood.

"Look, jedge! Look!" the bewildered negro showed a crisp, unfolded hundred-dollar bill. "Mr. Scummer gimme dis."

It seemed scarcely a moment before a dugout shot from the bayou's mouth, with Scummer paddling. Straight across the lake he traveled and never once glanced back.

"Ugh! Ugh!" The amazed negro hadn't caught his breath. "Ain't dat jest like Scummer! Dese folks in Hoot Owl sho do ack perculiar."

NO CHOICE

ONCE a sea lawyer instructed a new short-service seaman in the British navy that he was to say he had no religion, if the master-at-arms sent for him and asked what his religion was. In this way the new recruit hoped to avoid the necessity of falling in with the church parties on Sunday. Fortified with this instruction, the greenhorn looked forward hopefully to the following Sunday, when he was sent for by the master-at-arms.

"Is your name Thompson?" asked the officer.

"Yes, sir."

"What's your religion?"

"I ain't got no religion."

"Oh, you ain't got no religion, ain't you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, look here," announced the master-at-arms. "You're Church of England, you are—an' I don't want none o' your lip. You fall in with the church parties."

The Last of the Hakawahs

By Ernest Douglas

Author of "The Leg that Sang," "The Wooden-legged Mule," Etc.

Curious results are apt to follow an ignorant savage's uncomprehending change from his own to the white man's religion. So it was with "Pooty Goot," who temporarily abandoned his tribal gods.

OH, a god in a bird? To "Pooty Goot" there was nothing singular in the idea. It was well known that the deities of the Hakawah pantheon frequently assumed earthly forms; and from the moment that he first saw this road runner, a chaparral cock, fluttering among the creamy blossoms and lacy leaves of a low mesquite branch, he had marked much that was unnatural in its behavior. Plainly it was an embodiment of his own personal divinity, Oviktak, the beloved son upon whom the maker of all had conferred dominion over creatures that fly.

The ungainly bird hopped out from the foliage, slanted its long bill to one side, and eyed the old Indian intently. He stopped short. In all his experience this was the first time that he had seen a road runner stand still. Shy and suspicious of nature, they were wont to flee from the presence of man with prodigious, awkward leaps.

After perhaps half a minute, the feathered god trotted unhurriedly, but with evident purpose, across the stony bed of Quartzite Gulch. Pooty Goot followed reverently.

On a small patch of gravel, among drifted boulders, the runner paused briefly. With its feet it threw a shower of pebbles to right and left; then, with combined leg and wing power, it shot straight into the air and disappeared over a clump of sagebrush.

Pooty Goot made no move toward further pursuit. He had received the celestial message.

So it was no surprise, but quite what he expected, when he dug beneath the claw marks of the bird and came to a pocket of sand that gleamed yellow. After all, Oviktak had not forsaken this

last tottering survivor of a once numerous tribe that had worshiped him and his father and his brothers through so many centuries.

There was not very much of the sand, collected in a fracture in the bed rock, and Pooty Goot soon had it all spooned into a canvas ore bag. It made a light load for him, as he plodded over the mesa to a water hole in Frognose Canyon.

THE result of hours of panning, done slowly and methodically in order that no precious speck might escape, was a pinch of dust that could have been deposited upon a dime. It would buy him new overalls and a shirt to replace the tattered garments that no longer sufficed to protect his shriveled limbs from the thorns of desert shrubs and cacti. There would be enough left over to buy a few pounds of beans and perhaps a little flour; but not enough for a shotgun, even for a cheap old one. His god had been good, but not as good as he had hoped.

Pooty Goot shook his shaggy head in disappointment. A shotgun, such as an amiable trapper at Gloryville had once taught him to use, would greatly simplify his problem of subsistence. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to stalk quail, doves, or rabbits and pot them with bow and arrow. Besides, he knew of a valley swarming with mountain lions that bore fine pelts, for which white men would pay fancy prices. Properly armed, he could forgo this weary and usually fruitless search.

That night Pooty Goot slept in a cave on the eastern slope of the Eagle Tail Range. When the sun threw its bright streamers across the white-and-brown desert, he was already on his way southward, along a hogback that paralleled the mountains. It would have been much easier going down on the level mesa, where there were not so many flinty stones, and the chollas did not hug the ground so closely; but some primitive instinct kept him to the high ridge, from which he could command an unobstructed view of the surrounding country.

About midafternoon he struck a little used wagon road and swung eastward. The sun went down in purple and crimson splendor behind his back. Stars twinkled wanly in the dying sky, then flamed as brilliant lamps against a curtain of velvet black. Afar, a lone coyote dolefully imitated a whole pack. Giant saguaros loomed in the darkness, like specters from some mythical spirit land. A rattlesnake whirred in a brittle bush.

To all these commonplaces Pooty Goot paid no attention whatever. He resolutely pressed on toward the dazzling wonders of Gloryville.

The camp's dingy general store was apparently deserted, when he entered and blinked his eyes to accommodate them to the light of the oil lantern suspended from a rafter above. He placed his bare feet warily, for the floor was worn and splintered. With keen delight he sniffed the aroma of the place, a compound of odors from decaying potatoes and onions, rancid cheese, smoked meats, and desiccated tobacco. His glance roved over the shelves of canned goods and came to rest at the corner, where Eli Midden kept his meager stock of firearms on display.

"Why, hello, Pooty Goot!" The gaunt, bald, red-faced Midden, his hands oddly pressed over his ears, came in at the rear. "Where you been all this time I no see you? How you gettin' along?"

"Pooty goot."

"Yeah, you'd say you was makin' the grade pretty good if you knew you was goin' to be hung to-morrow. Well, have your heathen gods been leadin' you to any more placer pockets?"

"Pooty goot gods," replied the Hakawah, as he produced his buckskin poke with its modicum of dust.

Midden shook the gold into the tray of a jeweler's scale and weighed it carefully. "Ten dollars," he said.

The aged Indian's face fell. Again his gaze strayed to the guns in the corner. Knowing that there was no chance, he had yet clung subconsciously to the hope that there might be enough of the placer to enable him to make some deal for the weapon he so greatly needed.

"No shotgun this trip, old scalper,"

cackled Midden, reading his thoughts. "Your Great Spirit'll have to sick you onto a real strike before you can go huntin' with that twelve-gauge you've been hankerin' for all these years. Well, will you have your ten in cash or in credit?"

"I trade now. Pants—shirt—beans."

"Better wait till mornin'," Midden urged, looking nervously at a dollar watch. "I'm closin' up now for the night. It's about time for services to start over at the Gospel Tent. Here, take these crackers if you're hungry."

Pooty Goot's knowledge of English was sketchy. He understood only that the trader was closing his store, something that he had never done before at that early hour of the evening. The delights of leisurely shopping would have to be postponed until morning. So he accepted the proffered carton of stale cookies, went outside, and wolfed them down.

THE moon, up over Plomosa Peak, beautified with its silvery sheen the harsh ugliness of sadly misnamed Gloryville. By its rays Pooty Goot observed Midden, as the white man locked the door. Instead of his customary soiled overalls and jumper, Eli was now clad in flannel trousers, a tan shirt with new suspenders over the shoulders, and its too-long sleeves caught up by frilly elastic "holders." Evidently Gloryville's merchant prince was shaved and "all painted up" for some momentous occasion.

Midden replaced his warty hands over his ears, as though he were trying to force those flaring organs to lie closer against his head. He would have passed Pooty Goot without a word, but suddenly he was struck by an inspiration.

"Pooty Goot, you sure do look like a brand from the burnin'. An unwashed savage in need of salvation, if there ever was one. Here's where I make myself solid with the parson by herdin' in a new convert. Come along with me."

"Huh? Where go?"

"Never mind. It's not far. Maybe you'll hear somethin' good for your unmortal soul."

So Pooty Goot obediently shuffled along behind Eli Midden. They passed a dark and silent adobe building, with a faded pre-prohibition sign that proclaimed it to be the "Hard Rock Saloon," skirted a feed corral wherein a dozen freighter mules champed sadly, and came to a large tent pitched out in the greasewood.

"Wait!" hissed Midden. "She's startin' to sing."

A clear, girlish voice floated out over the desert wastes. Even the distant coyotes ceased their yowling to give ear to this melodious rival:

"This is my story,
This is my song:
Serving my Savior
All the day long."

"Gosh!" breathed Eli. "Ain't that pretty? Don't that make you feel like castin' out the devil and trailin' up to the mourners' bench, you old sinner?"

Understanding nothing of this, Pooty Goot made no reply. The song impressed him as rather agreeable noise. He wanted to hear more.

Midden shoved him on into the tent and found seats for both of them as near as possible to the pine box that served the Reverend Dudley Burton as a pulpit. Most of the twenty-odd camp chairs were already occupied. The entire population of Gloryville, plus two freighting outfits in town for the night, had turned out to hear the itinerant evangelist preach on, "Our Duty to the Church." Bent, sun-scorched, leathery old prospectors, most of them; and two wrinkled crones who claimed the distinction of being the only women nearer than Hassayampa, ninety miles away.

Across the dusty aisle sat "Boomerang" Sloan, so called because the salted mines that he sold to unwary investors came back to him as soon as the victims discovered their mistake. Sloan had long been the bosom pal of Eli Midden, but there was nothing friendly in the sardonic grin that he now bestowed upon the storekeeper. Mockingly he pressed his fingers to his own shapely ears and went through a pantomime of emptying a bottle of hair restorer over his wavy, iron-gray locks.

A growl of hatred rose in Midden's throat, as he turned his watery blue eyes to the front.

"And now, my dear friends of the desert, my daughter will sing for you once more, after which I shall open my discourse," announced the pudgy, black-coated little revivalist.

When Alice Burton arose and stood by her father, Pooty Goot comprehended immediately that she was the origin of the enmity that had sprung up between Midden and Sloan. The trader leaned forward and stared worshipfully, his coarse lips parted in adoration. The gaze of Boomerang was more assured, more openly covetous, more coldly calculating.

She really presented an unusual picture, with her pale-pink complexion, and her straw-colored hair piled high on top of her head. And she was strikingly attired in a pure-white, robelike garment of some soft material that left her rounded arms bare almost to the shoulders.

"An angel!" whispered Midden. "An angel right out of heaven."

At the conclusion of "Abide with Me," the applause was so loud and insistent that she had to sing again before Mr. Burton could give his text.

The preacher devoted considerably more attention to the material than to the spiritual obligations owed by mortals to organized religion. He was a strong advocate of the tithing system. At great length, and with many repetitions that enabled Pooty Goot to grasp his meaning imperfectly, he urged his hearers to contribute at least a tenth of their worldly wealth, as well as the same proportion of their earnings, to the holy cause represented by himself. And great was the Indian's disgust.

Eventually the sermon reached its end. There were a few more hymns in which several of the bolder spirits of the congregation dared to lift their cracked voices. Sloan sprang to his feet and ceremoniously passed his big white hat, into which the silver chinked merrily.

"Come on," exhorted Boomerang, shaking the unconventional collection plate under Midden's nose. "The parson's here to save us, and it takes coin to set in his game. Any short sport gets thrown out on his ear."

With another growl of half-suppressed rage, Eli dropped in a five-dollar greenback.

THE service ended with a prayer. Pooty Goot, sitting stolidly erect, perplexedly eyed the bowed heads.

"Now!" said Midden to the Hakawah. "Come on and let the sky pilot see if you look like pay dirt to him."

"Hey, you flop-eared old rat!" jeered Sloan. "What you mean by draggin' your redskin pardner in here among white folks?"

Midden ignored the insult, as he frantically waved to Burton. "Reverend," he said hopefully, "I've brought you a soul to save. This old Injun reprobate needs religion worse'n I did before you and Miss Alice converted me."

"Ah!" beamed the evangelist. "A real aborigine upon whom it shall be a pleasure to exert my most earnest missionary efforts. Tell me, my friend, do you still worship your tribal gods?"

"Pooty goot gods."

"Ah, an idolatrous pagan! But you shall yet see the light. We shall welcome you into the true church."

"Huh!" scoffed Pooty Goot. "Give you tenth my gold dust? You think me damn fool."

And to the astonishment of every one, Pooty Goot stalked majestically out into the night.

"Say, you sure caved in the drift on me after I took you to meetin' and treated you like a white man," wrathfully accused Eli Midden, when Pooty Goot appeared at the store the next morning. "That short-card crook of a Boomerang, he's sure got the inside track with Alice now; and it's all your fault. I ought to kick you from here to Hassayamp' and back."

"You give him one tenth your money?" asked Pooty Goot.

"We-ell, I'm goin' to, I expect. You're sunk too deep in ignorance and superstition to know what tithin' means. If you give to the church, all sorts of

blessin's will follow. Your prayers will be answered, and you'll get about anything you ask for. Now, I want you to go right over there and tell the parson you're ashamed of the way you acted up, and give him one of them ten dollars I paid for your gold. I'll bet you get it back a hundred times over."

"He give me shotgun?"

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised but what you got one, somehow or other, pretty soon. Besides, you want to throw in with the right God before you die."

"Hakawah gods pooty goot."

Midden continued to argue volubly, as he tied up and thrust into an empty grain bag the articles that his customer selected. When Pooty Goot's capital was reduced to a lone dollar, the newly made disciple declared desperately:

"I'll tell you, Pooty Goot, you hand that to the sky pilot, and if you ain't satisfied, the next time you come to town, that it's brought you a lot of luck, I'll give you another one."

"You give me shotgun?"

The miserly Eli squirmed. "I'll bet one will come to you somehow or other," he evaded. "Why don't you try it? Them Injun gods that you stick up for so strong—what have they done for you? They killed off your wife and your children and your friends and your whole tribe, exceptin' you, with smallpox and flu and one thing or another. Left you alone to freeze and starve in your old age. Why, the badgers and the jack rabbits have more fun and get more out of life than you do. Looks to me like it was about time you was tryin' some other religion. You can't do any worse, that's certain."

This argument swayed Pooty Goot as nothing else had. Long and carefully he weighed the words of Eli Midden. It was true that for many moons his gods had bestowed upon him no boon, aside from that one tiny placer pocket, although he regularly enacted the seasonal rites as best he could. And if his traffic with an alien faith brought no shotgun or other desirable result, he could get his money back. The proposition struck him as a good gamble.

SO Pooty Goot, sack over his shoulder, made his way to the Gospel Tent. Alice Burton, clad now in a gingham frock, was dusting the chairs. She gave him a friendly smile and called her father, who entered from a smaller tent in the rear, with a letter in his hand and a worried frown on his face.

"Welcome, my heathen brother. I hoped that you would return to hear more of the true word."

Silently the Hakawah passed over his dollar.

"Ah! Already a contributor to the good cause."

"Me find gold—ten dollars. One for church."

"Ah!" Mr. Burton was delighted. "Then you caught the spirit of my message, after all. I shall pray that Heaven shower its blessings upon you."

"Me want shotgun."

"I shall pray that Heaven send you a shotgun. To-night we shall pray together at the service. And now you will excuse me, while I read this letter to my daughter. I am greatly troubled."

Pooty Goot did not understand that he was expected to return, that his instruction in the fundamentals of Christianity had not even begun. He had had enough of civilization for one dose, and already he longed for the freedom of the mountains and mesas that he called home. He left Gloryville by the Hassayampa road, intending to turn off on the trail to Plomosa Peak. A vague uneasiness was stirring in his breast. Would Oviktak be offended? He must hasten to lay a propitiatory eagle feather upon the altar of the bird god.

Scarcely two miles out of town he came to an oblong case of brown leather lying in the middle of the road. His heart beating high with excitement and incredulity, he picked it up and unfastened the buckle at the large end.

Pooty Goot pulled out the unblemished stock of a new shotgun, then the shining barrel. The model was not exactly like the one with which he was familiar, and in his agitation it took him several minutes to fit the two parts together. Finally he had the gun in one piece and attempted to sight it at a giant saguaro

cactus, but his hands trembled so violently that the bead was a dancing blur.

Pooty Goot sat down by the roadside and considered. He had never contemplated any such speedy and generous reward for his tithing. It was evident that he had indeed been paying allegiance to the wrong deities.

But the gift from on high was incomplete. No ammunition had come with the gun. So Pooty Goot collected his augmented load and tramped thoughtfully, if elatedly, back to Gloryville.

Midden's eyes almost popped from their sockets when Pooty Goot entered the store with his miraculously acquired weapon. "Where'd you get that?" he gasped.

"Out there—road. White man's god pooty goot."

"I'll say he is!" Eli examined the gun carefully. "I know every shootin' iron on the desert, and this sure don't belong to anybody around here. I thought I heard somebody pass through late last night, and I'll bet it shook out of their wagon."

"Huh? Mine. Preacher, he pray for um."

"Sure! It's yours, far as I'm concerned. Now, maybe you'll believe what I tell you. Want your dollar back? I'll give it to you for this gun."

"No! Want shells. Me trade back beans, flour, for shells."

"Now, don't get in such a hurry, Pooty Goot." Midden chuckled and closed one eye speculatively. "Why don't you look around, first? Maybe you'll find a mess of shells out in the brush somewhere, just like you found the gun."

This idea was certainly worth considering. The Indian intrusted his leather case and provision bag to Eli, but kept the gun and went prowling around the neighborhood, first on one trail and then on another. And as Midden confided the joke to customers, as they came in, a throng of grinning observers assembled on his porch. Even Boomerang Sloan, cigar atilt, strolled over from his tiny adobe office—"Mining Investments"—and laughed heartily when told what was going on.

But the search seemed to be hopeless; the heavens rained no ammunition in Pooty Goot's path. His disappointment was aggravated when he flushed several fine coveys of quail. How he longed to try that shotgun!

AT length, when the day was almost done, he gave up and started back to renew his dickering with Midden. Right at the edge of town, he almost stumbled over two unbroken cartons of shells.

He was oblivious of the hoarse guffaws that arose from the store, as he hastily jerked out one of the paper cylinders and tried it in the chamber of his gun to make sure that it was the correct size. In sheer delight and exuberance he pulled the trigger and peppered an old carbide can.

The grins that greeted him, as he proudly strode into Midden's, he accepted as smiles of congratulation. He became the center of a curious throng, and in the hubbub he understood few of the hilarious questions that were thrown at him.

"You'll sure have to do something for the preacher, to pay him back for all he's done for you," Sloan suggested.

"I give him tenth."

"A tenth of a shotgun? How's that? Mean to saw off the end of the barrel?"

"Here, Boom, you cut that out," snapped Midden. "This is my party. Don't you go gettin' Pooty Goot all snarled up in his new religion."

Pooty Goot was really troubled by the point that Sloan had raised, and, after the crowd had melted away, he sought the advice of his mentor, Eli.

"Parson won't want a thing for gettin' you that shotgun and them shells," the trader declared. "You can go over and thank him, of course. No——"

It suddenly occurred to Eli that his suit would not be greatly advanced if Pooty Goot's story ever reached the ears of Mr. Burton and his daughter. Their ideas of a screamingly funny practical joke, and of what constituted good taste in humor, might differ radically from those of the Gloryvillians.

"You and him are all square," Midden concluded nervously. "You give him

your dollar, and he prayed you down a gun, so that's the end of it. Better not bother him any more; he's too busy to talk to Injuns, anyway. Just go on and forget about it."

But this did not suit Pooty Goot at all. As matters stood, the bargain was too one-sided to jibe with his ideas of justice and fair exchange. He considered himself greatly in the debt of the white medicine man. Besides, he wanted to know more about this extraordinary church that worked such marvels for its adherents.

What return could he, Pooty Goot, make that would even begin to discharge the obligation?

"Preacher man, what him like best?" he inquired finally.

"Money," replied Midden bitterly. "Coin—mazuma—*dinero!*"

"Gold?"

"Gold more than anything else. That's what you do, Pooty Goot. You go and find some more dust and bring it to him, and he'll put in the rest of his life prayin' for you."

This sounded more reasonable. Pooty Goot shouldered his belongings and departed.

Being far past his prime, the Hakawah could not obey his inclination and travel all night. Weariness and hunger soon overtook him, so he halted at a stockman's well, where he cooked himself some thin cakes over an open fire and slept until morning.

Noon brought him to a deserted ranch of tumble-down shacks built of brush and mud, sprawled at the foot of the jagged blue-black mountain known as Plomosa Peak. Ground owls hopped, and kangaroo rats, with absurd tufted tails, scurried where brown children had once played their solemn games; where squaws had ground corn and tanned skins and woven baskets and gossiped, while waiting for their braves to return from the chase with the flesh of bear, mountain sheep, antelope, or deer.

Despite the splendid shotgun in his hands and the comfortable conviction that he was now under the protection of powerful, indulgent spirits, a sense of utter desolation engulfed Pooty Goot. It was the same feeling of loneliness and dejection that had made him a wanderer in his own land and kept him from visiting his ancient home, except at those times when he returned to carry out in his laymanlike way the rituals that "Limping Coyote," tribal medicine man, had devoutly performed until the day of his death.

Resolutely Pooty Goot put aside all thoughts of the past, repressed all qualms as to the wisdom of the course that he had adopted. Firmly he trod past the oblong medicine lodge in the center of the village. He did not even look inside to see whether the holy baskets of clay animal images and other ceremonial objects remained undisturbed. Such things had been thrust behind him forever.

FROM a hillock between the village and the peak, Pooty Goot surveyed the mesa that he had just traversed. He could see for miles and miles across the dry, hot plain, where no creature stirred.

Assured that he was unobserved, Pooty Goot continued on into a tangle of glistening black malpai boulders, scattered about like the misshapen building blocks of giant children. One unacquainted with the secret of Plomosa Peak would have sworn there was no way through this slaggy maze, but the Indian leaped and scrambled over the stones until he came to the beginning of a crooked, almost imperceptible path, long unused by any one save himself.

The path was short and led him to a small, dark hole in the mountainside. Here he stopped and kindled a torch of mesquite wood left for that purpose. He discarded all other impedimenta except his shotgun, but clung determinedly to that, as he crawled into the orifice.

For three or four minutes he inched along. Then he stood erect in a lofty, irregular chamber. The beam of his torch failed to carry to the far side.

This cave was Mavitoöki, the house to which Mavitoök, maker of all, had retired when his work of creating the earth and training his five sons in their mundane duties had been completed. Mavitoök is known by different names to sev-

eral Southwestern desert tribes, and each claims that he lives in some cavern or canyon of its own neighborhood.

Pooty Goot kept along the right wall, unconsciously shrinking from the six more or less flat rocks on the left that were the altars of Mavitook and his sons. And soon, in a sort of niche in the wall, he came to what he sought.

Cutting through the solid porphyry was a six-inch band of white quartz, held together by wire gold. The existence of this treasure had been known to the Hakawahs for centuries, long before the coming of the whites. To them it had no more value than the barren matrix which surrounded it. And after the Spaniards and Yankees came, with their unaccountable greed for yellow metal, it had never occurred to the natives to use the hallowed wealth for their own benefit. Everything in the cave was sacred to Mavitook, and terrible punishment would most certainly befall any one so impious as to violate his temple.

Pooty Goot prodded experimentally at the gleaming quartz with the blade of his knife. It was harder than he had supposed, and he could break off only a few fragments.

So Pooty Goot returned to the village and found an old hammer, also a rusty iron spike. With these tools he pecked away patiently at the golden quartz. By nightfall he had his canvas ore sack almost full.

The weight of the bag, when he lifted it for the first time, surprised him. If he lugged all that cargo to Gloryville, he must leave everything else behind. Although he hated to part with his gun, his gratitude toward Mr. Burton and his enthusiasm for the creed that he supposed he had embraced were still so strong that, when he set out the next morning, the firearm remained in the safety of the cavern, and he staggered along under all the ore he could carry.

It was a trying march that Pooty Goot made that day. The evening was well along when the lights of Gloryville winked out of the gloom. He kept to the south of the town, circled around the feed corral, and came to the spot where the Gospel Tent had stood.

No tent was there. Nothing but a white square, bare of creosote bushes, marked its former site.

BLANK disappointment overwhelmed Pooty Goot. The fervor that drove him onward oozed from his tired limbs. The sack slipped to the ground, and he sank upon it wearily.

Perhaps the preacher had not gone far. He clutched at this straw of hope. Eli Midden would know.

Again shouldering his load, he plodded to the store. Midden and Boomerang Sloan were there, no one else. Apparently their former relation of brutally frank comradeship had been renewed, for they sat on opposite sides of an upturned packing case, playing poker. Gone were Eli's "celebratin'" clothes, and his greasy overalls again covered his big frame. His ears stuck out unrestrained and his shave had lost its freshness. Sloan deliberately puffed a fat cigar with an orange band.

"Hello, Pooty Goot!" said Midden carelessly.

"Well, old turtle," cut in Sloan, "how long's it going to take you to decide which phony ace to play?"

"Preacher man, where gone?"

It was Sloan who snorted and replied:

"To that hell he's always spouting about, I hope. But Eli, he'll be getting letters from sweet Alice right along. Eh, 'Romeo?'"

"Shut up! They stung you for twice as much as they did me."

"Wonder if he really got a letter that his wife was sick. Anyway, he pulled his freight just in time to dodge a necktie party."

Pooty Goot, striving to comprehend the drift of all this, was hopelessly befogged. At the point of physical exhaustion, his body swayed slightly. His cramped fingers relaxed their grip on the sack and it thudded to the floor. Its string broke, and the sparkling quartz spilled forth.

The white men stared a moment in stupefaction. Together they dived for the ore, and each came up with a double handful.

"No! No!" cried Pooty Goot, trying

to snatch it away. "Belong preacher man."

"He told me he was goin' to find a placer pocket for the sky pilot," said Midden huskily. "And he brings in—this! Looks good enough to eat, don't it?"

"Dust!" exclaimed Sloan. "Jewelry, rather. Why, this would make The Peg Leg, The Lost Frenchman, or The Black Ben look about as rich as a post hole. And there must be a lot more where it came from. He cobbed it out of a ledge somewhere. See! Here's the mark of his steel."

"Where'd you get it, Pooty Goot?" demanded Midden, his voice quivering with excitement and his Adam's apple jumping spasmodically.

If there was one thing of which the confused Hakawah was positive, it was that he would never reveal the location of Mavitoöki and its treasure to these selfish and conscienceless palefaces. They had spoken disrespectfully of his benefactor, which was sufficient reason why they should be distrusted and avoided.

"Belong preacher," he repeated duliy.

"That old four-flusher!" shouted Sloan. "Pooty Goot, you've got no idea what a pair of swindlers he and that girl turned out to be. I think they must have drifted out here to the edge of nowhere because the real church folks were after 'em. Anyway, she promised to marry every bachelor in camp. And as fast as she'd rope one in, her daddy would go to his prospective son-in-law and put up a hard-luck story and touch him for anything from a hundred up. We all came across with our 'tithe.'"

"No use to try to explain all that to an Injun," interrupted Midden. "But Boom's right, Pooty Goot. Burton and the gal trimmed us right."

"Preacher man pray, me get gun—shells."

"In a pig's eye! The fellow that lost that shotgun out of his wagon was back here yesterday, looking for it; but we told him you probably wouldn't be in town again before spring. And Eli, the old fraud, planted those shells where you'd be sure to find 'em."

Pooty Goot, staring at the flushed face of Midden, knew that Sloan spoke truth. His soul recoiled in horror of what he had done. He, the last of the Hakawahs, had been guilty of straying off after false gods, and with his own hand had desecrated the home of Mavitoök, maker of all.

His one desire was to get away by himself, with his shame—to hasten back to the cave and abase himself before the altars of all six of the Hakawah gods. He turned and groped toward the door. But Sloan seized him by the arm and forced him down into his own chair.

"You're among friends at last, old-timer," asserted Boomerang, with a heartiness that was almost convincing. "You can trust us to take hold of your strike and make you more dollars than a burro can pack."

"You fool!" raged Midden. "What you don't know about handlin' an Injun——"

"Close your trap, Eli, and get Pooty Goot something to eat. Open a can of salmon. Or what would you rather have, pardner?"

Pooty Goot refused the food they offered. He appeared to be lost in a daze.

"A night's sleep is what you need," Sloan declared finally. "Come on over to my place, and I'll put you in my bed. Give you a bottle of whisky, too."

THE Indian suffered himself to be pushed out of doors. While Eli was locking up, Boomerang led him down the steps.

Pooty Goot set his unshod foot upon some smooth body that writhed and squirmed. There was a swift whir, and he felt a sharp pain just in front of his right ankle joint.

"Criminy!" ejaculated Sloan. "Rattlesnake! Where is it?"

"There, going under the house," said Eli, as he struck a match. "Bite either of you?"

The Indian answered the question by slumping down upon the step. Quickly the white men located the punctures of the rattler's fangs. Sloan hoisted the limp form to his shoulder and raced over

to the one-room adobe behind the Mining Investments office.

Pooty Goot was almost amused at the frantic efforts of the whites to save him. He lay down upon Sloan's bed and allowed them to pour fiery liquor down his throat. They slashed at his ankle with a razor and injected permanganate of potash into the wound. It was all so futile, he thought. Mavitoök had sent his second son, Vámatak, the one who ruled over all crawling creatures, to punish him for his transgression. He must die.

And when black unconsciousness slipped upon him like a heavy, suffocating blanket, he knew that death was at hand.

It was an astonished Pooty Goot who awoke the next morning in the broad light of day. Could this be spirit land? And this being, sitting beside him and smoking a cigar with an orange band—surely it could not be Mavitoök. No; it was only Boomerang Sloan.

"How come, old side-kicker?" Sloan's grin was one of vast relief. "Feel better? Say, but you gave us a scare last night, with no doctor nearer than Hassayampa. How about a little drink? Breakfast?"

Pooty Goot was not deceived. He knew that this solicitude for his welfare arose entirely from desire to learn the source of the ore that he had brought in for the hypocritical Burton. Again firm in allegiance to his ancestral theology, now that he knew the supposed miracles were an accident and a hoax, he resolved that the secret of Mativoök should never be revealed by himself. White men would not only take the gold, but with their mining operations would destroy the temple utterly.

Without a word he ate a hearty meal. He wiggled his toes and found his foot only slightly sore.

Some one knocked at the door. Sloan opened it an inch or so and peered out, then snarled ungraciously:

"Get away from here. Can't a gentleman have any privacy?"

As he shot the latch, Boomerang explained:

"Thought it might be Eli. Nobody else knows you're here. You savvy, Pooty Goot, that we've got to keep this strike of yours to ourselves for a while. When the news gets out, there'll be the blamedest stampede this desert ever saw. Think you'll be able to travel by tonight? We'll slip away in the dark and have everything staked right and proper before the rush starts. Then Eli and I will see that you have everything you want for the rest of your life. A hundred shotguns and a trainload of shells, if you want 'em. You know we're your friends, don't you? Didn't we save your life last night?"

It was Pooty Goot's opinion that they had done him no service, but he refrained from comment. He lay on his back and brooded, heedless of Sloan's persuasive monologue. This stubborn silence worried and exasperated Boomerang.

ALL day the Hakawah lay wrestling with his distressing thoughts. Midden came in for a time and painted a glowing picture of the life of gorgeous ease that he would soon be enjoying, but elicited no response.

Pooty Goot fully realized that he was a prisoner. If he could only make his way back to Mavitoöki and prostrate himself before the altar, the maker of all might relent and indicate some way in which he could atone for his sin. But how escape?

He was let alone late in the afternoon; but the door was fastened tight, and a glance through the one high little window showed him that Sloan kept watch from without. Restlessly he moved about the room, vaguely hoping that he might find a knife or some other weapon. There was nothing that awoke his interest until he lifted a battered cigar box off a shelf and heard something clattering about inside.

The box was full of rattlesnake rattles, a collection accumulated by Sloan over many years. In Hakawah theology the rattles of snakes were supposed to possess many subtle virtues, being secondary only to eagle feathers in that respect.

Instantly a plan flashed into Pooty

Goot's mind. Holding these reptilian relics in his hand, he supposed that it came straight from Vámatak, the snake god. True, it was fraught with danger to himself—grave danger—in view of what had happened the night before; but that deterred him not at all.

Into his pockets went the rattles and also a bit of candle that he had already noticed.

Again Sloan brought him food, which he ate with relish. When he had finished he broke his silence.

"Start pooty soon now."

"What? You'll show us the way to your strike to-night?" Sloan was overjoyed and at the same time a little skeptical.

"Sure!"

"I knew you were all right, Pooty Goot. You wouldn't go back on us after the way we've treated you. Now, Eli said you were—well, never mind. We'll have three horses here just as soon as it's late enough to get away without any danger of setting off the fireworks too early. Now, you stay in bed and take it easy till we're ready. Like a little drink? No? You're right. Plenty of time to celebrate later."

The moon was past the zenith when Sloan steered him out by the corral, where Midden waited with the horses. The white men were prepared for eventualities, with revolvers and saddle guns.

Once mounted, the Indian took the lead. He pointed his little black mare's head toward Buckskin Butte, the first mountain of any size west of Plomosa. Sometimes at a gallop, sometimes at a swift trot, the trio pushed on across the desert, swerving aside for nothing but the frequent clumps of ghostly white tree chollas. Sloan and Midden, burning with gold fever, were at the same time tense with anxiety and exchanged only monosyllables.

Just as the stars began to pale before approaching dawn, the travelers came to an abandoned mining camp, right at the base of the butte. There were two or three old lumber buildings in ruins, and rusted pieces of machinery lay scattered about.

"Desert Venture, ain't it?" asked Eli.

"Nothing else," replied Sloan. "Was it around here that you found your high-grade stuff, Pooty Goot?"

"There." The Hakawah pointed to the dark mouth of a tunnel driven directly into the butte.

"Funny! That company spent a lot of money here and never found a thing. Now you come along and—well, it just goes to show what the mining game is. Bring a flash light, Eli?"

"No."

"Neither did I. Never thought about going underground. Well, this'll have to do."

Sloan ripped a pine board from one of the buildings and soon had it burning smokily at one end.

"I go first." Pooty Goot took the torch and again led the way.

"Ugh!" puffed Midden. "Spooky in here and cold. Don't smell good, neither."

"Spooks!" sneered Sloan. "We're on our way to a million dollars, and I'd like to see any banshee try to stop me. But it's too bad that 'Little Lord Fauntleroy' left his smelling salts at home."

Six-footers both, the white men were continually bumping their heads against the low roof. Pooty Goot, trotting steadily, drew ahead of them.

"Hey, not so fast with that light!" called Sloan.

Pooty Goot stopped abruptly, thrust the torch into a crevice in the wall, and gave it a twist that extinguished the flame. The tunnel was plunged in Stygian blackness.

Sloan and Midden bawled in astonished anger. Their howls mingled with a dry, rustling noise that soon swelled into a roar.

"Holy smoke! Snakes! Lemme out!"

Pooty Goot heard no more. He was advancing carefully but rapidly along the tunnel, lifting his feet high and setting them down solidly. They brushed a few wriggling serpents, and then he left behind the colony of rattlers that he had aroused by poking a blazing brand into their favorite sleeping place.

At last he dared to light the candle that he had brought from Sloan's cabin. He turned to the left, into a crosscut,

and in some ten or fifteen minutes emerged into the open air, fully an eighth of a mile east of the main portal of the mine.

From the concealment of a rocky knoll he reconnoitered the Desert Venture camp. Sloan and Midden were standing on the dump and looking into the tunnel. Evidently they knew nothing of this second opening. Perhaps they were debating whether they ought to go to his rescue; or did they suspect that he had tricked them? No matter.

Pooty Goot almost laughed. He had escaped. The snake god had been good. And his own desultory exploration of the old mine workings, made two seasons before, had borne splendid fruit.

Two hours later the last of the Hakawahs was on his knees before the altar of Mavitoök, chanting a savage invocation to the maker of all. Boomerang Sloan's rattles were deposited upon the altar of Vámatak, adjoining.

It was almost sundown when thirst drove him forth to seek a spring in a near-by arroyo. He was almost in despair, for Mavitoök had given him no sign. To-night he would sing the snake song to Vámatak, and if no omen should be vouchsafed, he would appeal to Oviktak, the bird god in whose year he had been born.

IN an aureole of glimmering gold the sun was sinking behind the blue-and-purple Eagle Tails. But Pooty Goot did not even pause to admire this grandeur for one brief moment. He plodded dejectedly along the short trail and climbed upon a basalt boulder, whence he dropped down upon the other side.

Right at his feet was a half-smoked cigar with an orange band. Its frayed end was still moist.

Sloan and Midden had followed him here, no doubt believing that sooner or later he would visit the village. One of them, at least, had been within ten feet of the path. If they had found it——

Back into the cave scurried Pooty Goot, his thirst forgotten. And inside he did not chant to Vámatak nor invoke the assistance of Oviktak. Firm as was his restored faith, he felt that this was an emergency that could be met only by practical action.

He did not have to think what he must do, only how to do it. There was a tradition, handed down through many generations, that if danger ever arose of Mavitoöki being discovered by an enemy, the entrance could be effectually closed by dislodging a certain stone on the mountainside above.

With Sloan and Midden watching the village for him, perhaps even angry enough to shoot on sight, how could he get to that stone and accomplish his object?

That side of Plomosa, he reflected, would be in shadow for about two hours after moonrise. He must work quickly. If he had a pick or a shovel his task would be comparatively easy, but he had no tools, save the hammer and spike that he had used to gouge out the ore he had meant for Burton.

Crickets were chirping, and nighthawks were cooing, when he emerged once more into the outer world. The short desert twilight was already over, and the dusk was relieved only by the feeble light of stars.

Soundlessly, without displacing so much as a pebble, Pooty Goot made his way up the slope. His eyes soon accustomed themselves to the darkness, and without difficulty he located the malpai boulder that he sought. Beyond, stretching up the mountainside for fifty yards or so, was a veritable sea of similar volcanic rocks.

It was with real engineering art and nice appreciation of the laws of physics that the oboriginal Hakawahs had placed this keystone and arranged the others behind it, so that its removal would start a malpai avalanche. Pooty Goot, however, had little clear idea of what he was doing; he was merely carrying out the ancient mandate, the origin of which was lost in the mists of the past.

Many centuries had settled the boulder firmly in its bed. Pooty Goot scratched away the hard earth on the lower side. It was slow and wearisome work, and soon he was wet with perspiration. Swollen tongue and parched lips reminded him that he had not swallowed

water since the night before; still he toiled on, even when he remembered that he had left his shotgun in the cave. That weapon, once so precious, seemed a trifle of no consequence now.

The better part of an hour elapsed before the stone tilted toward him, then stopped. Excitedly he leaped up, got behind it, and shoved with all his strength. It went crashing down the mountain.

With many a grind and groan and snap the acre of malpai began to move. Rejoicing in his success, Pooty Goot did not realize his danger until it was too late to flee for safety.

More helpless than a feather in a whirlwind, he was borne along in the vanguard of the slide. Not a square inch of his body but what was buffeted and pounded a thousand times. One sharp corner dug deep into his side and knocked the breath from his lungs.

Eventually—probably in less than a second—he was flung out upon the mesa, stunned and bleeding, but still alive. Blinking away the blood, he opened his eyes. A cloud of dust hovered over the spot, where had been the one and only ingress to Mavitoök's temple. And, as the dust settled, he was satisfied that no man would ever find the cavern. It was hidden forever. His work was done.

In the torment from his side he forgot all else. He tried to stand, but could not. So, on wounded hands and lacerated knees, he crawled toward the medicine lodge.

It was a journey of only a few rods, but one fraught with agony for Pooty Goot. Repeatedly he sprawled unconscious, only to awaken and struggle onward toward his goal.

He pushed aside the rotting deerskin hanging in the doorway and painfully crossed the threshold. The moon was now over Plomosa, and its rays, sifting through a hole in the crumbling roof, showed him a row of willow baskets. There were six of them, one large and five small, and all contained the crystals, the feathers, the turquoise beads, the snake rattles, and the colored animal figurines which the medicine men had used in their ceremonial worship of Mavitoök and his sons.

Pooty Goot crept to the basket of Oviktak.

Sloan and Midden found him there the next morning, the clay image of a road runner clutched in his cold, stiff hand.

JEFFERSON'S GARDEN TO BE RESTORED

THE love of a garden is a distinct English trait. Our early New England colonists had no sooner cleared the ground for their cabins than they began to plant a few flowers. The traditional garden continued as part and parcel of every American home in the East and South until the value of city ground made the practice of garden making prohibitive. For twenty-five years, more or less, the American interest in gardens flagged, and even in the country the lovers of flowers were not legion. With the revival of country life in America, the garden again came into its own. To-day we have gardens in America that can match the famous gardens of England. All garden lovers will be interested to learn that the gardens and orchards of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello are to be restored. Jefferson was not only an architect of discernment, but a devoted lover of gardens. Some of his notes on his gardens and orchards have been found, and will be used by the landscape gardeners who have the restoration work in charge. While we have many new plants unknown to Jefferson, most of the eighteenth-century favorites are still in use. Boxwood was a prime favorite with all English eighteenth-century gardeners. Not far from Washington is the garden of George Mason, the intimate friend of Jefferson. Here the box trees have grown so tall that they have to be trimmed on a ladder.

In the Devil Pagoda

By Herbert C. Arliss

Holloway had just been transferred to Shanghai, and his superior in the military intelligence service there did not take him too seriously. But if Holloway had not been on the job, a certain half-caste adventurer would surely have played the deuce with diplomatic conditions.

AS Major Thomas Millard, of the United States Army Intelligence at Shanghai, dropped easily into the swivel chair before his desk, he ran a cursory eye over his morning mail. A flicker of recognition passed across his face, as from among the varied assortment of letters he selected eagerly a small, plain envelope, addressed in a familiar hand and bearing a local cancellation. Deftly he ran his letter opener through its upper fold, examining with avidity its sole content—a stiff business card. Then he elevated his eyebrows knowingly and thoughtfully laid it aside.

The remainder of his correspondence he opened somewhat abstractedly, then lifted a small wooden mallet and struck sharply a brass gong which stood upon his desk. An orderly appeared; and for the next hour or so, Millard occupied himself in giving dictation and sundry instructions. The increased antiforeign agitation of the past few weeks and the growing nervousness on the part of the entire Occidental population was adding much to the burdens of his department. He was anxious to get all items of general routine and matters of minor importance off the slate before giving his undivided attention to the thing that was now uppermost in his mind, and which, he had a hunch, would prove to be the most important event of the day—or of many days, for that matter.

"That's all," he said at length, as he turned again to the innocent-looking card he had laid aside, "except to tell Mr. Holloway to report to me as soon as he comes in."

"He is waiting to see you now, sir."

"Send him in."

The meeting of the two men was only mildly cordial. Since Holloway had arrived from Hongkong and reported at Shanghai, in obedience to cabled orders

from Washington, the pair had not hit it off especially well together. The major had seemed to resent Holloway's presence there. He had, he said, his own system of espionage, which he felt was getting results. Washington, however, apparently felt differently about it and had sent up this man who had been born in China, spoke the language fluently, understood the people, and, after many years of business experience in south China, had for the past eighteen months rendered valuable service as special agent to the United States consul at Hongkong. There had been no open unpleasantness between the two, but Millard's attitude had curtailed Holloway's usefulness. He found it difficult to work with a man who was not in sympathy with him.

"What do you make of this, Mr. Special Agent?" asked the major. There was a malicious little twinkle in his cold gray eyes, as he handed Holloway the piece of pasteboard.

Holloway took the proffered card. It looked commonplace enough on its face.

When in Shanghai visit
THE TWIN DRAGON BAZAAR
44 Little Jade Street.

The best of everything in Chinese curios, art, silk, embroideries, and ivory, at lowest prices. English spoken. American understood.

He turned it over in his hand. On the reverse side some one had written in a sprawly hand: "Just arrived. New shipment of valuable Shantung silks. Your early inspection invited."

He handed it back to the major. "Might mean nothing at all; might mean a whole lot," he said laconically. "Depends who wrote it."

"Exactly, my boy," gurgled the other. "You are absolutely right. It might mean nothing at all, if it should fall into the hands of those for whom it is not intended; but to me it happens to mean a whole lot. Bet your sweet life it does."

He tapped the card knowingly with a stubby finger. "Just arrived," he said, "means that Sing Ling Jo, ostensibly the genial proprietor of the Twin Dragon Bazaar, but actually my most trusted and valuable informer, has just returned from a trip of espionage through the neighboring provinces. New shipment of valuable Shantung silks means that he is in possession of important information. And the invitation to make an early inspection means that I should lose no time in calling upon him. For obvious reasons, he never comes here; but his bazaar caters chiefly to foreign patronage, and my presence there is not likely to awaken the least suspicion. Guess I'll run around and give his silks the once-over. Maybe you'd care to come along, Holloway."

It was the first time he had shown a disposition to let Holloway in on any matter of importance. That he did so now, the latter felt was more from a desire to demonstrate the efficiency of his own system and the excellencies of his much boasted spy, Sing Ling Jo, than from a willingness to take the other into his confidence. But Holloway never quibbled about motives when an opportunity of this kind was afforded him; and then, too, such an invitation from a superior officer was almost equivalent to a command. "At your service, major," he responded cheerfully.

The major received his acceptance of the invitation with more cordiality than he had shown at any time since Holloway's arrival at Shanghai.

IT was a bright, crisp, winter day; the wind was keen and piercing. Little cirrus clouds in fantastic shapes chased each other across an otherwise clear sky of cerulean blue, as the pair made their way in jinrickishas across the International Settlement. Holloway was muffled in a heavy overcoat, and Millard was dressed in his smart, closely fitting regimentals.

At the Amber Pheasant Bird Market they alighted and turned off the Nanking Road into the Street of a Thousand Gold Pieces—a narrow flag-paved thoroughfare, devoted almost entirely to native banks and to the open-front stalls of the ubiquitous money changers. It felt good to be out of reach of the biting wind, and the continuous jingle of silver coins, as they were poured from one bamboo

basket to another, weighed, counted, and stacked, was pleasant to their ears.

"This man, Sing Ling Jo," remarked Millard, as they made their way through the crowds, "comes originally from down your way, I believe. Father was an English trader or something of that sort, down in Singapore. Married a Chinese woman while he was there. Went home and left her with a raft of kiddies, I guess. Jo has been in business here for a good many years, he tells me. Making good, too, from the looks of things."

"So?" muttered Holloway, and he fell to wondering.

"Given me lots of inside dope during the past six months," continued the major. "But, then, of course, he is well paid for it."

Holloway made no comment for a while. He was busy with his thoughts. "Major," he said at length, "I would suggest that you say nothing to your friend about my years in China. Just a greenhorn from the U. S. A., you know."

The major smiled indulgently.

At the Garden of the Four Seas, an imposing and much-frequented tea shop on the Street of a Thousand Gold Pieces, the low murmur of many native voices, punctuated by the shrill cries of the serving boys, reached their ears through the ornate fretwork lattice of scarlet and gold. It was the "Hour of the Horse"—the time for the business man's midday tea, gossip, and "little eats." The pungent odor of jasmine. woo-lung, and steaming dumplings was inviting, but they did not enter; instead, they turned sharply to the left and made their way along the picturesque and winding artery known as Little Jade Street. Here small, modest-appearing shops housed a fabulous wealth of gold, jade, amethyst, emeralds, opals, amber, ivory, and valuable porcelains.

This section of the city being a Mecca for the treasure-hunting foreigners, their presence attracted but little attention on the part of the Chinese throngs, save that occasionally it provoked an inimical scowl from some passing young lad, to whom a foreign military uniform was anathema.

The treasure house of Sing Ling Jo occupied a prominent position on this little street, but had about it an air of mystery and quiet indifference. Two unpretentious display windows, one on either side of the doorway, contained a few choice specimens of porcelain, ivory, cloisonné, and lacquer ware, skillfully set off against a background of black-and-gold brocade. Entrance was had through a low-arched doorway, supported by two massive blackwood pillars, about which tenaciously clung the twin dragons, two writhing, open-mouthed, gilded monsters, with scaly throats, horned heads, snarling jaws, and red-lacquer tongues that protruded angrily. Above the arch was a black-and-gold sign of intricately carved letters which read: "The Twin Dragon Bazaar. Enter."

WITHIN, the air was heavy with the scent of sandalwood and pungent incense, and warm with the comfortable, even heat of invisible charcoal braziers. Sing Ling Jo's treasures were displayed with a cunning forethought, commensurate with his subtle insight into the psychic peculiarities of the gullible foreigner. Two robed, soft-slippered attendants, whose inscrutable faces looked as though they had been carved out of satinwood, moved quietly about the room. They turned, as the foreigners entered. Both bowed obsequiously, thrusting their hands inside the sleeves of their padded silk robes. Major Millard was well known there. One of the attendants pointed silently with his chin in the direction of an anteroom at the rear of the store.

Sing Ling Jo was awaiting them, arrayed in his best robe of brocaded plum-colored silk, a pair of heavy horn-rimmed spectacles resting upon the notably prominent bridge of his nose, a black-silk cap set somewhat jauntily upon his close-cropped head. If he was surprised, as he probably was, to find that the major had another with him, he did not show it. He removed his spectacles with a flourish, in token of respect, and greeted them cordially in English.

Millard introduced his companion, observing the latter's caution. Sing Ling Jo bowed politely but indifferently; with

his fan he waved them into high-backed, polished teakwood chairs. A felt-slippered serving boy placed before them tiny opaque cups of steaming tea and retired, softly closing behind him the heavy-paneled door.

Instantly Sing Ling Jo dropped all his formality, and with it most of his Oriental exterior. Astounding was the transformation. Almost as though he had snatched off a mask and thrown aside a cloak, he revealed the real Sing Link Jo—a crafty, Mephistophelean, half-caste adventurer.

"I have important information for you, major—very important," he said in a thick, heavy voice, which Holloway at once recognized as that of an opium smoker.

"So I supposed, Jo, when I got your message," replied the major. "For that reason I lost no time in coming. Shoot!"

The half-caste flashed at Holloway a look of covert doubt.

Millard understood it. "It's all right, Jo. Go ahead."

"You have heard of the affair the students and labor unions are planning for Thursday?"

"I've heard something about it. Street parade and mass meeting to protest against extra-territoriality, unequal treaties, and all that sort of thing, isn't it? Not much harm in that, I guess."

Sing Ling Jo's face registered scorn. "Do you know where the mass meeting is to take place?" he croaked.

"In the Queen of Heaven Market Place, opposite our part of the international line of defense, I understand."

Holloway smiled. He had himself given the major that information.

"Do you know why they have chosen that spot for their mass meeting?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Because," leered Sing Ling Jo, "it is known to be the weakest spot."

Millard looked puzzled. "I don't get you, Jo," he parried. "They're not likely to pull any rough stuff. But what if they do? Our lines may not be so strongly manned as the British and French, but a handful of our marines would have no difficulty in taking care of a mob of unarmed students and coolies."

"Perhaps not," grinned Sing Ling Jo, "provided they are students and coolies."

Millard became impatient. "Cut out the mystery stuff, Jo, and spill your information in plain English. You are not paid to entertain me with conundrums."

Sing Ling Jo fixed his eyes upon the lotus pattern in the rug at his feet, and he picked his yellow teeth with the smallest blade of a very small pearl-handled pocketknife. "My information was secured at great danger, Major Millard. It is worth much to you and all the other nationals in Shanghai."

The major's eyes snapped. "You have always been well paid, and will be, so long as you provide reliable information," he exclaimed angrily. "But you know that I only pay for what I get, and never before delivery. So come across, now, if you have anything worth telling."

THE half-caste continued to pick his teeth, regarding the major out of the corner of his slightly slant-set hazel eyes. Holloway, appearing not to look at him, studied him intently and with growing interest.

"Well, here it is, then," he blurted at length, straightening up and looking knowingly at the pair of them. "Except for a few leaders like Soo Hoo Ching and Wong Leung, they will not be students and coolies. They will be soldiers. Two thousand of them, dressed as students and coolies, but every one secretly armed. Picked soldiers from both armies, North and South. They are to mass innocently before your American section of the line and attack without warning, wipe out your couple of hundred marines with powerful hand grenades, and swarm into the International Settlement."

"Poppycock!" snorted Millard. "What can they hope to gain by that? How long would two thousand Chinese soldiers last against the combined forces of French and English already in the Settlement, and those that could be landed on mighty short notice from the battleships in the harbor? You surely don't expect me to believe that big fool yarn."

Sing Ling Jo looked indifferently over his shoulder. "Believe me or not, ma-

jor. You will find out soon enough if you do not take advantage of my warning. Within a few hours after the coup, ten thousand reinforcements will swarm into the city. They will come from all directions. Even now they are already moving down from Hankow, Nanking, and Sunkiang. I saw with my own eyes preparations for this move."

Millard stared at him in bewilderment. "And you say this is to be a coöperative move on the part of the Northern and Southern armies? Impossible, I tell you —with both parties sworn to exterminate each other in order to gain control of China."

AGAIN Sing Ling Jo smiled. This time it was almost the inscrutable smile of a Celestial. "What is it you Americans say about ways that are dark and tricks that are vain? Yah! How little you really understand the Oriental, after all your experiences with him! Has it never occurred to any of your big bugs to wonder why the Southern armies have been allowed to advance and take city after city, with so little bloodshed. Can't you see that the Northern armies have been falling back and allowing the Southerners to move up close to Shanghai? Don't you see why Chang Tso Lin and Wu Pei Fu have dropped their own little scrap?" He rose from his seat and moved across the room to a map of China which hung upon the wall. "Look here," he continued; "with Chan Kai Shek at Hankow, Chang Tso Lin and Wu to the North, and Chang Chung Chang at Sunkiang, can't you see how Shanghai is hemmed in?" His voice cracked with contempt. "Haven't you Americans another saying about blood being thicker than water? *Aih Yah!* These warlike yellow brothers can well afford to drop their own quarrels when there is a chance to drive the hated foreigners out of China."

"My word, Sing!" gasped Millard. "Your argument almost sounds reasonable—but, still, I can't quite stomach it. How long do the chinks think they can hold Shanghai, with a couple of dozen foreign battleships bombarding it from the harbor?"

"They figure it will never come to that. The success of the Nationalists at Hankow has given them the idea that the foreigners savvy they haven't any real right to hold concessions in China. They are counting on the British and American labor parties to prevent actual war, to say nothing of the thousands of foreign lives and millions of foreign capital that would be destroyed in such a bombardment."

"Lord!" muttered Millard, again under his breath. "Are you sure you got it straight, Jo? You have never failed me before, you know."

"Sure as hell, major. Sure, I got it straight. But to-night I shall go back into the native city, where the students and labor leaders are to have a confab. If I learn anything more I shall send word to you to-morrow."

Two cups of tea followed. As Sing Ling Jo followed them to the door of the shop and bowed them out, he was again the genial Chinese business man, the dignified proprietor of the Twin Dragon Bazaar.

AS Dick Holloway killed the butt of a cigarette in a brass ash tray that held many similar butts, he rose from his comfortable armchair before the fire and stretched himself. Major Millard had not invited him to attend the meeting of international leaders that was to be held that night in the American consulate; but he was content; he had other fish to fry.

He crossed the room, pulled open the door of a camphorwood wardrobe, and surveyed its contents. A mandarin robe, some coolie garments, a Chinese military outfit, a uniform of an officer in the Russian Soviet army, and sundry other toggery he passed up. The garment he selected was a warm, padded robe of a Chinese merchant. From a drawer beneath he took a pair of dark-colored pantaloons to match the robe, a pair of felt-soled slippers, and a warm, close-fitting, felt cap—the popular Chinese, cold-weather headgear.

It was the "Hour of the Chicken"—the hour of the evening rice. He had not dared to go abroad earlier, lest his

disguise be detected. He must now hasten, lest Sing Ling Jo leave his place on Little Jade Street before he should reach it. A delicate dye, applied to his face earlier in the afternoon, had given his skin just the right tint, and his eyebrows were appropriately darkened. A tiny ring of bamboo slipped into each nostril gave the nose the desired spatulate appearance. He was glad he did not have a prominent bridge, and he thanked the gods for his brown eyes which, behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, would pass well enough, if not too closely inspected. The high, turned-up collar of his robe covered most of his neck, and the felt cap entirely hid his chestnut hair and fitted snugly over his ears.

An icy wind drove frozen snowflakes into his face, as he stepped out of his ricksha and entered the Street of a Thousand Gold Pieces. The banks and stalls of the money changers were all closed tight; but there were still many people threading their way through the narrow street. His pulse beat inordinately. He had worn this disguise several times before as an experiment, on evening rambles through the native streets; but this was the first time anything important had depended upon his ability to escape detection.

During the hour or more that he was forced to wait in hiding behind a pile of wooden refuse buckets at the entrance of a narrow alley, just in sight of the Twin Dragon Bazaar he nearly froze to death. As the minutes passed, his heart sank, fearing that Sing Ling Jo had set out earlier in the evening. The picturesque old watchman, muffled in innumerable layers of padded cotton garments, had just passed through Little Jade Street, beating on his tiny, gayly painted, pigskin drum the "Hour of the Dog"—nine o'clock, foreign-devil time—when Holloway heard a sound as of a heavy iron bar being removed. Then from the dark patch, which was the doorway of the bazaar, a bulky figure, clad in robe and cap of bearskin, emerged stealthily, hesitated a moment, and set off briskly in the direction of Chapei, the native city.

Holloway followed cautiously.

THE way led through the tortuous maze of the Street of Little Sparrows, and over the Soo Chow Creek, by way of the Bridge of the Turtle. Sentries were no obstacle, for both men had the pass. Outside the International Settlement the dangerous part of Holloway's escapade began. His heart pounded annoyingly, as he stalked his man through a maze of filthy, dark, and slippery alleys.

At length they emerged at a large open space, which he recognized as the Queen of Heaven Market. Directly across from it, the American section of the international line of defense came to a sharp salient. The barbed-wire entanglements were dimly visible. He waited in the shadow of a building, while the muffled figure crossed the market place.

On the other side the bulky form stopped and turned, as though wishing to make sure he was not being followed; and then Holloway saw him do a surprising thing. Instead of plunging again into the native city by one of the many narrow streets beyond the market, he moved on down the short one-sided thoroughfare, which ran parallel with the other side of the salient and terminated at the foot of a barren hill. Upon the crest of this hill stood the deserted and dreaded Devil Pagoda.

From an old Cantonese who kept a tea shop over in the Cantonese section of the city and had accompanied him on many of his trips through the native quarters, Holloway had heard the story of this pagoda. Centuries ago—so the story ran—a renegade priest had murdered his father and fled there for sanctuary. After much deliberation, members of the clan had decided that even a priest who committed the crime of patricide—the most hideous of all crimes—was not entitled to sanctuary. A party had approached the pagoda with the intention of slaying the guilty priest. The first man to enter had uttered a horrible scream and made a hasty and terrified exit. He had seen, he said, on the floor of the first story of the building, the dead body of the murderer, surrounded by a group of angry devils who were

hacking it to pieces with knives. Since that time none had ever dared to go near the place. A curse had been put upon it by the local priests, and it had come to be known as the Devil Pagoda.

Not daring to expose himself to view, Holloway chose the longer way and, keeping in the shadows of the buildings, passed around the edge of the market, reaching the other side just in time to see his man ascending the hill. "Blood will tell," he muttered to himself; for he figured that no full-blooded Chinese would dare approach that pagoda.

To his Cantonese friend, Holloway had once expressed a desire to explore this outlawed edifice; but the old fellow had wrinkled his yellow, pock-marked face in a frown of undisguised disapproval. "When one is young and has all life before him," he had droned, "one does not put his head wantonly into the mouth of a tiger." "And, besides," he had added after further reflection, "it is not given to one who seeks to cultivate the friendship of a people, to flaunt the mandates of their priests."

"That is true," Holloway had replied. To himself, however, he had said, "Some other time." That time had now come.

THOUGH by no means the largest, this pagoda was one of the oldest in that section of China. It boasted of only five stories, and it was not more than a hundred and twenty feet high. But, as Holloway entered the ground floor, which consisted of one large, empty, hexagonal room, he could feel—more than he could see—that he was in the midst of age and decay. He had slipped a flash light into the pocket of his robe, but he dare not use it here. He stood motionless, while his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Gradually he was able to discern the outline of a narrow stone stairway that wound around the interior wall. He listened. There was no sound. Stealthily he ascended the stairway, keeping close to the wall; for there was no railing at the outer edge. For just an instant now he bent over and flashed his light close to the steps. A momentary gleam told him that he was on the right track. There were fresh footprints.

He followed the stairway till it landed him on the second floor. Sufficient light filtered through the windowless apertures to show that he was in another vacant room—smaller, but similar to the one below. On the third floor the openings were still smaller, and it was darker, but he was able to trace the outline of a shrine and an altar against the farther wall. Something black and soft and cold flopped into his face; another came in contact with his outstretched hand and uttered a frightened little squeak. "Damn!" he exclaimed inwardly. Bats might mean good luck to the Chinese, but he did not fancy them at such close quarters. Again he took the winding stairway and, arriving on the fourth floor, found himself in a room in which was stored a large number of earthenware jars, such as are used for the retention of human bones after they have been taken from the graves, to make room for other bodies. It was not necessary to examine them; the strange, uncanny, moldy odor assured him that they were not empty.

As he stood peering into the darkness, sounds for the first time reached his ears —the low murmur of voices coming from the room above. He mounted the stair with the stealth of a cat. His heart stood in his mouth, as he made a sharp turn and came abruptly, face to face, with a rude, wooden door. Several cracks in this door allowed feeble shafts of light to pierce the darkness about him. Again the sleazy wings of some ugly denizen of the darkness flopped about his head and brushed against his cheek, as feverishly he removed his spectacles and placed his eye to one of the cracks in the door. With difficulty he controlled his breathing.

IN this room the apertures were all covered with reed matting. Three men were seated on upturned boxes, around an improvised table, on which stood a small earthenware bowl, containing a tiny lighted wick, floating in peanut oil. One of the men was the bulky form clad in bearskin. His back was turned toward Holloway, but he had removed his cap, and there was no mistaking Sing

Ling Jo. Another was a man of similar type, but features as subtle as a cross-legged bronze Buddha. He might have been Chinese, or he might have been half-caste; but he had all the appearance of an adventurer. The third—Holloway started, as he looked from his point of vantage across the table and into his small, shifty, weasel eyes—Ivan Koskavin, the notorious bolshevik agitator, who had been responsible for so much of the communist intrigue in Hongkong and Canton. For months Holloway had kept tab on this man's movements in Kwon Tung, and then he had suddenly lost track of him. He had learned that Koskavin had moved up to the Shanghai region to continue his propaganda; and ever since his own arrival there he had been trying to get a line on him.

The instant he laid eyes on this Russian his suspicions of Sing Ling Jo crystallized; and now, as through the crack in the door he listened to the half-caste's words, these suspicions became positively confirmed. Sing Ling Jo was giving an account of his conversation with "the two American blockheads," and chuckling, as he described the way in which Major Millard and "the other greenhorn from the States," had swallowed whole his story of the chimerical "coup."

"Excellent, Comrade Jo—excellent!" gurgled Koskavin, gleefully rubbing together his thin, bony palms. "And you, Comrade Charlie, what did you learn in your little visit among our good Chinese brothers to-day?"

Holloway's flesh tingled, as he heard the name. "Comrade Charlie!" without a doubt, this then must be "Penang Charlie," the much-talked-of Mecanese spy in the employ of the bolshevists, on whose head several governments had put a handsome price. Holloway had heard much concerning his exploits in Hongkong, as the tool of Ivan Koskavin, but he had never before laid eyes upon him.

The man replied in a low, guttural voice:

"All stands as planned, comrade. Tomorrow the market place is to be cleared of all stalls; a platform will be erected in the center, the parade will take place the next day and will reach here about two o'clock. Soo Hoo Ching and others will address the mass meeting from the platform."

Koskavin's shifty little eyes glittered like two incandescent beads. He rose from his seat and dragged from the shadows a queer-looking machine gun.

"See!" he exclaimed devilishly. "Today I finished it. Its bark is removed, and, with the smokeless cartridges I shall use, it will be perfect. We shall be absolutely secure." He waved his long, lean hand in the direction of one of the apertures. "From that window," he said, "we shall command the whole square. We shall wait until the head of the procession reaches the speakers' platform; then we shall open fire; and Soo Hoo Ching and a score of those about him will fall—slain, as everybody will suppose, by the ruthless American imperialists who have so long posed as the friends of China." His voice broke into a cackle, as gloatingly he looked into the eyes of the other two.

There was a momentary silence. Sing Ling Jo broke it.

"Wouldn't it be better," he said half-heartedly, "to spare Soo Hoo Ching and content ourselves with some of the smaller hash?"

"No! A thousand times, no!" rasped the wild-eyed Russian truculently, as, standing, he now towered above them. "Soo Hoo Ching is the idol of both the student and labor parties, but he is too conservative, too much afraid of a little blood-letting. Have we not waited long enough and tried often enough to awaken these stupid pigs out of their indifference? Have we not talked ourselves hoarse? What we need is something to stir them to action—something to touch them to the quick. Slay the idol, and the faithful will revolt. Is that not so, eh? Direct action, comrades—direct action! That is what we need. Poof! What to us is the life of Soo Hoo Ching, or a dozen such as he, if we gain our end? Name of a dog! As soon as their leaders fall, the mob, encouraged by some of the young hot-heads, whom Comrade Charlie has well schooled, will rush the barricade, believing they can repeat the Hankow incident; and the fool

Yankees, thinking the promised attack is taking place, will open fire. What a massacre! Think of it. One hundred, two, three hundred, or even more, unarmed students and coolies slain by the hated soldiers of imperialist America! Ha, ha! I tell you, comrades, it will turn all China red! Aye, it will turn all China red! Then will come the realization of our dreams—world revolution!"

He put his hand into his breast pocket and drew out a folded, crumpled sheet which he opened and held before him. He trembled with excitement. "Listen, comrades," he said, "to the new song of Soviet China." He tossed back his head. His wild eyes gleamed. He waved one hand in the air, beating the tempo in ecstasy, while he sang softly in a strident, unmusical voice. In spite of its poor rendition, Holloway recognized Oley Speaks' stirring parody "On the Road to Mandalay." He listened carefully and caught the words of the refrain:

"Coming down from Hankow way,
'Tis the dawning of the day.
Can't you hear the Chinese singing, while the rapid firers play?
Coming down from Hankow way,
Ever nearer to the bay,
For the dawn of freedom's coming, crimson red from Hankow way."

The two spies caught something of his enthusiasm and muttered incoherent approval.

"And now, comrades, attention!" he said, sobering a little. "To-morrow night we meet here again. It is to be understood by our friends that we have gone to Hankow. I have provisions here enough for two days. When we appear again, we shall find thousands ready to enlist under our crimson banner."

Holloway's head swam. As he listened to this astonishing recital, alternate hot and cold waves had swept over him. "Of all damnable plots!" he said to himself. "The Devil Pagoda! Lord, what an appropriate meeting place for such demons of hell!" He had heard sufficient. He must hasten away before their gathering broke up and his presence was discovered. He turned to go. His foot slipped; he lost his balance and fell over the railless edge of the stairway. Though he doubled himself up and clutched frantically at the stone steps, as he fell, he was only able to break the force of his fall, and he landed on the floor below with a sickening thud, escaping, by inches only, crashing among the earthenware jars, and desecrating the precious bones of somebody's ancestors. Instantly the voices above ceased. The tiny stream of light at the top of the stairs vanished; and he knew that their crude lamp had been extinguished. Realizing that not a moment was to be lost if he was to escape detection, Holloway crept swiftly to the nearest aperture. As he wriggled through it and out on to the narrow balcony, he heard the door above open. For what seemed an interminable length of time, he heard no other sound, as he pressed his body close against the outer wall of the building and waited, motionless. It was bitterly cold. The wind pierced through his thick garments, as though they had been the sheerest cotton. His teeth chattered. At length there came the sound of stealthy footsteps and very low voices. Still he waited. At last, from his position of vantage, he saw a shadowy form descend the hill at his feet, and melt into the darkness of the native city. It was followed by another, and then another.

It was the "Hour of the Cow"—two a. m.—by the illuminated dial of his wrist watch, when, benumbed and stiff-jointed, he finally dared to emerge from the decrepit old pagoda, descend the hill, and make his way through the deserted streets toward the International Settlement.

SLOWLY the orderly procession made its way toward the Queen of Heaven Market Place. For more than two hours some three thousand students and coolies had been marching in solemn dignity, keeping, for the most part, close to the international boundary. Fluttering in the chilly breeze, their improvised banners of white printer's cloth bore, in English and Chinese, inscriptions of no uncertain meaning: "Revoke Extra-territoriality," "Abrogate Unequal Treaties," "Abolish Foreign Concessions," "China for the

Chinese." Noisy drums, raucous bugles, and an unmistakable martial spirit bespoke their enthusiasm and determination; but there was perfect decorum.

In the International Settlement the movements of foreign troops had been much in evidence during the morning. Across from the market place, on the other side of the boundary line, a thousand United States marines were bivouacked, in full fighting kit, wearing steel helmets, their arms piled, bayonets fixed.

At the head of the procession, on small mountain ponies, rode Soo Hoo Ching, and several of his associates. The cool, level-headed and popular leader of the student Nationalist Movement seemed thoroughly unperturbed. One near enough to have studied his face closely might have discovered traces of that something so often seen in the faces of great men, as they approach a crisis in their lives, or in the lives of the cause they have espoused. As he came within range of Holloway's binoculars, he turned slightly in his saddle and spoke to the man who rode at his side. The other nodded gravely. Together they turned their eyes momentarily in the direction of a small window, high in the wall of a towering pawnshop that stood like a sentinel at the entrance to the market place.

From their point of observation in the upper story of a building slightly back of the international boundary, Holloway and Millard watched in breathless suspense. Even to them it had not been given to know what would be Soo Hoo Ching's method of dealing with the situation which was every moment becoming more dramatic. The only satisfaction that this self-possessed young patriot had given them, when they had secretly met him and informed him of Koskavin's dastardly plot, was contained in a characteristically cryptic remark:

"I would prefer," he said, "that you gentlemen leave this affair to me. We Chinese have our own way of dealing with such matters." Millard let it go at that; but, in order to avoid any suspicion on the part of Koskavin, had astutely arranged a substantial show of force at the American line.

Surreptitiously Holloway trained his binoculars upon the tower of the Devil Pagoda. The muzzle of a machine gun was clearly discernible, slightly protruding from one of the windows, and behind it a figure moved cautiously.

The procession entered the Queen of Heaven Market Place. When Soo Hoo Ching had advanced halfway toward the speakers' platform, which stood in the center, and the square was partially filled with his followers, he reined in his pony and, leisurely turning its head, faced the oncoming host. At a sign from the one who rode at his side, the procession came to a halt. The drums and bugles subsided. A great hush fell upon the surging throng.

Soo Hoo Ching raised himself erect in his stirrups, his flowing student robe fluttering in the breeze. He was speaking; but only those near him could hear what he was saying. No word of it was audible over in the American lines. He ceased speaking and again lifted his eyes in the direction of the window in the pawnshop tower. Then suddenly his right arm shot into the air above his head. Instantly stillness gave place to the deafening roar of a mighty explosion coming from the direction of the barren hill. Thousands of astonished eyes saw red-and-black fury burst forth and belch high into the air, as from the sudden, violent eruption of a pent-up volcano.

When a few seconds later, as the bewildered crowd gazed in silent awe, fragments of masonry, burning splinters, and other odds and ends fell again to earth, scattering themselves over the barren hillside, there remained of the Devil Pagoda, literally, not one stone upon another; and on both sides of the international boundary there were those who knew that Ivan Koskavin, Sing Ling Jo, and Penang Charlie, bodies and souls together, had passed into the limbo of lost things.

Holloway shuddered.

"*Sic semper traditories,*" he breathed.

The Kidder

By Berton Braley

THE kid was born with a roguish grin;
He kidded his parents from the start.
He smiled and gurgled his way within
The warmest chamber of every heart.
His grin was warm, but his nerve was cool,
And so, though never a shark for knowledge,
He laughed and kidded his way through school,
And joshed and jollied his way through college.

He kidded himself to a pleasant job;
His rise in life was a swift progression,
For, though he hadn't a brilliant knob,
He kidded his boss to that impression.
If you should view him with expert eyes,
He really hadn't a lot to show;
But people thought him extremely wise—
He'd kidded 'em into thinking so.

He jollied his path to the social crest
With a sparkling charm that naught could dim,
And he picked a queen of the very best
And kidded her into wedding him.
He swims in power, he rolls in pelf;
He's won to honor and high degree;
He's kidded the whole world—and himself,
Till—he is all that he seems to be.

And what's the moral of all this stuff?
The moral's one that I won't keep hid:
That, if a kidder is good enough,
The world's his oyster—and that's "no kid!"

The Hunter's Moon

By Frederick Irving Anderson

Author of "Live Bait," "When, If, and As," Etc.

Up in the woods Catesby Loring was a wild-looking man, with a weird, sinister reputation among his neighbors. Elsewhere——Well, those neighbors had no idea how strange a man Loring really was!

ALONG toward three o'clock the old coon dog, Nip, came slinking in, rather dubious about his reception; for he had been gone a long time on affairs of his own; in fact, he had concluded these affairs and was jauntily on his way home, when he happened to remember what he had been brought out for, and he came sneaking back. But all he found under the waxing moon was a cold camp of horse blankets, arranged in so many lifelike attitudes, among the spreading roots of the old oak, by the bubbling spring at the upper end of the wood lot, known since time forgotten as the Horse Pasture.

The moon had come up through the notch in the timber on Town Hill, where the Ives boys had cut their pine. It was a white night, clear as crystal spring water, and so cold that the frost snapped in the laggard sap of the apple trees. The bubbling spring tinkled metalically where the ice built little eaves about the rim.

Nip, cringing and all set to jump and run, sniffed his way from one bundle to another, giving this one a wide berth and ignoring another altogether. He had his own opinion of his master's choice friends, and he was at no pains to conceal it. When he came to "Bi's" blanket, he cunningly inserted his nose in a warm crevice and pried an opening for himself and crawled in, without rousing the sleeper. No more hunting for him this night, if he knew it! He stretched out luxuriously against the small of Bi's back, and undoubtedly the scoundrelly dog would have stayed there, warming and giving in warmth, until he was kicked out in the morning—as had happened on former egregious occasions—had not there come an alarm about four o'clock, that brought him bounding to his feet in demoniac fury and quaking

terror, as he fought off the clinging blanket.

JUST what had caused Nip to make half-hearted passadoes at the most umbrageous of those ominous shadows that lurk on the edge of woods by moonlight, none of the aroused and irate horse blankets thought it necessary to inquire. Poor Nip had come to the fate of Cassandra. No one believed him! When he barked on trail, it was the general belief that he had run in a skunk; as a watchdog at home, he was equally discredited. And he was not permitted to sleep indoors because of the violence with which he was wont to dream.

"That darned fool sneaked in on us again!" said Bi, recovering his blankets. "Shet your fuss, or I'll brain you!" he threatened, swinging viciously at Nip, who was in the act of backing out of a charge much more ferociously than he had plunged into it.

Jason, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, declared sepulchrally that any one who ever caught him, Jason, hunting behind that particular lop-eared piebald, mangy, flea-bitten excuse for a coon dog, again, had his leave to put a load of rock salt into him, Jason.

"You was the one that wanted I should fetch him," said Bi.

"Well, he is the only dog in town," said Jason. He added dryly: "And he has moved out of town, hereafter, as far as I am concerned. That dog's lost his nose!"

Uncle Charlie, always a little more curious or cautious than the others, was moving along the edge of the woods, pausing now and then to listen. In the character of "Natty Bumppo," of Leatherstocking fame, which he maintained even in the face of a civilization that had advanced to decadence in these parts, he took nothing for granted, not even Nip. No sound rewarded him, only unbroken silence. In fact, old Nip himself, seeing Uncle Charlie penetrate those terrible glades with impunity, started off quietly on his own hook and was forgotten.

Armiston, and his guest, Parr, the police deputy, for whose delectation this coon hunt was organized, came out of their horse blankets less snappily than their rural friends. Encased like cocoons in blankets that had known horse quite recently, their slumber had been not only peaceful but profound; but to awake to the discovery that everything they touched—axes, lanterns, guns—was coated with wraiths of ice from frozen dew, gave them rheumatic twinges of astonishment.

"What time is it?" demanded Oliver Armiston, teeth chattering. He was too selfishly cold to think of his own watch.

"Four o'clock," said Orlo, opening his lantern to light it.

"Get out!" protested Jason. "Why, it wa'n't one o'clock when we sat down to wait for that fool dog to come in."

"And the moon wa'n't up, either," said Orlo.

That was true. When they sat down to light their pipes and wait for Nip, golden Sapella, blue Rigel, and green Aldebaran had hung overhead; now the stars were snuffed out, and the moon was riding free of the treetops. A watch said ten minutes past four. There was no room to doubt that sleep had taken three hours from them; thanks to Nip, it hadn't taken more.

"I remember," said Orlo, chuckling over the blanket he was rolling for Parr, "one time we sat down to wait for Nip, and when it set in to rain, we picked out a big tree and rolled up under it. Well," he laughed, "daylight woke us up! Of course, Nip was there, sleeping with Bi! But the tree was a dead one, without a branch or leaf. Wet? Well, you can just bet!"

The lanterns were all lit now, timid flares that hardly held a candle to the splendid hunter's moon. But when they stepped into the gloom of the woods, the swinging lanterns conjured up a troupe of lights and shadows that glittered ghostily in and out among the trees, as the party advanced. The weird effect was heightened by the fact that they walked under hemlocks, with soft needles underfoot to mask their footfalls. They were away up in the western part of town, beyond the old Emmons place. For this, as well as for everything else to-night, it seemed, they were indebted

to that false alarm, Nip. It was he, running ahead and teasing them along with his whines and whimpers of false hope, who had lured them up here to this unaccustomed spot, doubtless for reasons best known to himself.

"Here's what he was barking at," said Jason, coming to a halt in a little moonlit clearing. The sod was torn up, and the fresh red clay was exposed as if by two active men with pick and shovel. Uncle Charlie dropped to his knees and flashed his electric torch among the clods; the raw earth held the imprints of the murderous cloven hoofs of deer. One could picture a death battle of love-bitten stags plunging, striking, butting.

"He's running them!" cautioned Uncle Charlie, holding up a warning finger. Breathlessly they listened. Out of the hollow tube of night in the forest, the inept ear can summon a medley of harmonies and dissonances, as from some far-off swirling swarm of harpies, stirred by mutterings, suppressed screams, sighs, giggles and whisperings. Orlo and Uncle Charlie abruptly resumed the march, the others falling in behind. They broke a path through a skirmish line of brush and were under the trees again, the attendant shadows of the swinging lanterns circling before them, just out of reach. Parr pulled deep at the crisp air, laden with balsam.

"This is the life!" he thought. "They've got nothing in town like this for tired business men."

SIX hours ago—or had it been six centuries?—the great Parr, policeman, the inexorable pursuer, had emerged from a room, where for hours he had been slowly wearing down the resistance of a desperate murderer, extorting a confession. Everything in that room stank of humanity at its worst. Looking back on it now, over the span of a few hours, it seemed incredible that the triumph of that miserable confession should have given him so much elation. Well, he had stepped out of it, as one steps out of a cloak. When he left the train up here to join his friend, Armiston, for this week-end, he had turned a page. Here was the sheer simplicity of saner things! And here he was now, trudging along in a forest almost primeval, with tree trunks dancing crazily in the witching lantern light; and here and there a break in the canopy, to let through a splash of the waxing moon, heavy with freezing dews. Parr threw back his head. He had needed that sleep, and he thanked that rascally cur dog. Now, refreshed, he was even grateful to old Nip for having lured them so far from home before abandoning them, so that they must track back across thickly wooded hills, where even roads were memories.

The pleasant drone of voices accompanies them. Now and again, a pause for listening, watching! To the two city men the voices of the night said nothing, but to the others the woods were alive with articulate sounds. Parr himself, walking down Fifth Avenue of an afternoon, saw things in the crowd unseen by other eyes. So here for Uncle Charlie, and in a scarcely less degree for the others.

"But didn't you ever get a coon with him?" Oliver was asking. They were talking again about the nefarious Nip.

"We used to, yes, lots of times," said Orlo, quick to defend Nip's bygones. Nip had lost his repute only recently.

"Remember the time we let Catesby Loring come along?" asked Jason, laughing.

"Catesby Loring?" said Oliver. "Why, I know Catesby Loring."

"Not this one, I guess," came the deep voice of Orlo. They were crawling over an old stone wall, half buried in vines, and he held the lantern high for them to see their footing.

"He's a sleepwalker," said Jason. "He'll get out in the middle of the night and whistle for his horse, and ride him, hell bent for leather, and never wake up!" He paused. "Well!" he resumed, to fill the gap of interruption, "Nip ran a coon up that ash which stands by the big pool on Thorpe Brook, on your place. You know the tree." Armiston didn't, but he was ashamed to admit it. Out here one should know and have friends among rocks and trees, as he does among human beings. "I climbed!" said Jason, chuckling. "Gee! Gosh! It was an

awful climb. It's thirty feet to that first limb, straight as a telephone pole. And the darned coon jumped, just as I reached for him!"

"Reached? What did you reach for him for?" demanded Parr fiercely.

"To push him off, of course!" said Jason. "Well, that coon lit, right in front of Catesby Loring! And Catesby grabbed him quick, by the hind legs, and he swung him against a tree to bash his brains out before he could turn and bite. Only it wasn't a tree. It was Catesby's brother-in-law, Dominick, standing there in the dark."

The narrator paused on this happy period.

"Well," he resumed, "when we finally pulled Dominick out of the brook, his nose was broken, and his jaw was broken in two places. Oh, he was hopping mad! He swore Catesby was trying to kill him. I'm not so sure but what he was, at that," concluded Jason. "Things that happen since might look like it."

"How about the coon?" demanded Parr.

"Oh, it knocked the coon silly! Nice big fellow. Eighteen pound, wa'n't it, Orlo?"

Orlo nodded. Yes, it had weighed eighteen pounds.

"I know a Catesby Loring in town," repeated Armiston.

"This is another one," said Orlo. "He married an Italian woman. He goes off for a long time and then comes back. I'll show you where he lives—down here a piece."

THE voice of Nip emerged from the depths, plaintive and weird. It ceased on a staccato yelp.

Lifted feet arrested themselves; swinging lanterns became still; even the attendant shadows paused. They were all vibrant expectation.

"He's run in something!" This from Bi, excitedly.

"Sounds like a skunk!" put in Jason, though why a dog's bark, coming from afar, suggested skunk, was too much for city lodgers.

"No," said Bi. "I don't think so. Hark!"

They strained their ears painfully. Curious, thought Parr, how one could build up suspense over nothing. A nearby brook was laughing over some secret of its own. They started on.

"Where was he barking from?" asked Oliver.

"Over by the reservoir," said Bi.

"No, sir! Sounded to be up by the pond," said Jason.

"He's down in the hollow back of the Loring place," said Uncle Charlie. Orlo nodded.

But when they finally came in sight of the Loring place, half an hour later, it was not the cheery bark of a dog, calling in the laggard hunters, that had guided them. There was no Nip. The gossiping drone of voices ceased, as they came near, as if muted by the nearness of the man they had been talking about. In town, the Loring houses—there were several distinguished branches of the family—were mansions, show places. This Catesby Loring lived on a little island in the midst of an ocean of hardhack—hardhack, the symbol of sloth and deterioration up here. In late August, the steeple flowers, throwing up their bright mauve plumes, must have made it a wildly beautiful garden.

Now it lay dun and desolate. The house itself, which had stood empty a long time before this last Catesby Loring took to coming back, was a thing of slabs and patches. It was overshadowed by three memorable pines, huddling together, vast, primitive, their dark silhouette splashing a Japanese print against the bright sky. Catesby Loring apparently made some effort to keep the yard about his door free of the encroaching hardhack, but beyond the rubble fence the shrub stretched across the pasture to the woods; its velvety pile was broken here and there by spots of grass and outcropping of rock in the revealing moon.

The men were in a sunken lane, stepping from bog to bog. To any one looking on, as they so silently picked their way, each with his gun or ax or club, they must have seemed a formidable party. They must skirt the sleeping house closely; there was no other way

around, except through thickets. Ice crackled, as some one of them made a misstep.

"Quiet!" warned Orlo over his shoulder. "She's liable to give us both barrels of a shotgun."

The going became soppy. There was a live spring in the lane. They clung to the dry land on the steep sides.

"Isn't there a dog?" asked Oliver nervously. He was at Orlo's shoulder. Orlo shook his head, smiling up at the sky.

"No dog would live with him," he said. "There are men like that."

THEN, as they came to the head of the lane, where it turned into the barnyard, Catesby Loring himself stepped out from the shadow of the wagon shed into the bright white night and paused, facing them, without a word. He swung a shining ax easily in one hand, and in the other he carried a loop of rope. He was bareheaded; he had drawn on his trousers over a shirt; he was barefooted. Maybe the moonlight magnified him, but in that instant's pause he seemed almost heroic, with brawny arms and chest uncovered, the wind lifting his thick, wild hair.

The hunters had come to a standstill. Uncle Charlie, who was foremost, shifted his ax, not to swing, but to grasp it as a man grasps a quarter stave to fend off a blow.

"Easy, Charlie!" cautioned the low voice of Orlo. "Don't wake him up!"

Uncle Charlie nodded, not taking his eyes off the man.

Catesby Loring lifted his head and whistled shrilly through his teeth, a harpy scream. He seemed to listen for a moment, then he advanced. He swung from bog to bog, avoiding the icy water, as if by instinct. He moved swiftly through their ranks, within touch of their hands. As if their feet were chained to the ground, they leaned away from him, lest he brush them in passing.

"Yes, he is a Loring!" thought Oliver Armiston, holding his breath, as the sleep walker fared on. No one could mistake that head. It wore the pride of eagles. They were Cape folks who had made their money in whaling. The boast of the Catesby Loring in town was that he had never done a day's work in his life. What was the vainglory of this kinsman of the mighty thews?

Twenty steps beyond them he came to a halt by the bars of a field gate. He stood, his head lifted, as if staring out over the barren pasture. He whistled again, turning an ear. Silence. He whistled again—a peremptory summons—and again! After a pause of several seconds, the answer came, the neigh of a horse. The horse was coming at a gallop, whinnying eagerly, hoofs striking fire among the boulders. Catesby Loring laughed silently to himself; with a single twist of his wrist he stuck his ax solidly in the gatepost, the shining bit biting deep. Then he let down the bars. The horse came hard at him, but the man did not give ground. The horse stopped short beside him. For a moment man and animal stood rigid, statuesque, a truly beautiful picture in the moonlight.

"Better wake him up," urged Parr below his breath.

"No. It would kill him!" replied Orlo in the same tone. Such, at least, was the legend of the countryside. Catesby Loring slipped the halter rope about the obedient animal's neck and, continuing the chain of action, he sprang up and astride. The creature swung, curvetted, and in three strides was going at a run. Catesby Loring was beating him wildly with the halter end. The hoofs rang against the boulders. The shadows at the edge of the woods enveloped them.

"He'll cast that front plate!" said Orlo.

"What? What's that?" cried Oliver, coming to, with a start.

"He's got a loose shoe! There it goes now! Listen!" Orlo held up a hand. Oliver listened. There may have been some change in the accent of those wild hoofbeats to tell an apt ear that the horse had cast a shoe, and which shoe, but Oliver's ear was not educated to it. For a long time they could hear the pounding of the earth, but finally even that died away. But the spell still held them.

"Have you ever seen him ride before, Orlo?" asked Oliver.

"Yes." Orlo was troubled. He stared at Oliver, then turned to stare at the dark woods that had swallowed the phantasm of the horseman. "I never seen him ride that way before—with his eyes shut," he said. "He always had them wide open!"

"But he couldn't see anything," protested Armiston.

"Maybe not, but it didn't seem so spookish," said Orlo.

"Won't he come back?"

"Sometimes he does. Then again he goes away and stays. Once we found him over by Blandford."

"We had better rouse out the house," said Parr, looking at the ramshackle home of the Lorings, where it crouched in the shadows of the pines.

"No, thank you!" retorted Orlo. "They are not a pair to monkey with!"

It seemed heartless to depart, but they finally started off, with many a look behind, and now and then a pause, listening. They crossed the ridge and dropped down into the valley of their river, expecting, to the last, to hear the sound of the returning hoofbeats. But there was nothing. It must have been six o'clock when they paused at Orlo's gate. The moon was hiding behind a coal sack in the heavens, and the Dog Star was blinking across the sky at the brightening east.

"Come in and have a bite," invited Orlo. He yawned. It was chore time, and he wouldn't go to bed. But they didn't stop. When Oliver and Parr got home, Aunt Ivy was opening up for the day. This was her cleaning day, Saturday, a day of dust and soapsuds.

WHEN they came down for a second breakfast at eleven, they found Jason there.

"That dog, Nip," said Aunt Ivy, examining a jar of honey in the light of the kitchen window, "has got too much on his mind."

This was her way of consoling them for coming in without a coon.

"I wonder if he came home," said Parr, making a bib of his napkin, for he saw that waffles and honey were indicated. He was pleased to note that he was slipping into the habit of referring to his animal friends as if they were people.

"That dog isn't coming home again," put in Jason from the lower end of the table.

"Eh? What's that?" The two stared at him.

"Something happened to that dog," said Jason positively. "I could tell the way he yelped. You'll find him in a trap or something, over by Spectacle Pond."

"Uncle Charlie says he was down by Catesby Loring's," said Parr. Aunt Ivy looked up from her batter.

"He was riding again, last night, that man," she said, the spell of the weird gripping her. "I wonder where he thinks he's going, when he's that way."

There was a problem for a sage to ponder. Just then there came the familiar creak of wheels. It was Orlo at the gate. His team pulled out of the wheel track to pick at the frosted rowen, and Orlo lay back against the bolster, on the reach, cutting off the heads of mullein stalks with deft strokes of his whip.

"Did he come home yet?" asked Jason. Orlo would know. All sorts of intelligence, but especially the kind that tapped itself across country from one hollow log to another, sought out Orlo first. He shook his head.

"I'm going up to do his chores," he said.

"Isn't his woman there, either?"

Orlo's whiplash decapitated a mullein stalk, with the report of a pistol shot.

"Some one come by just now says it looks like no one is home," he said. He drew in his lash, examining it critically. The screen door swung on rusty hinges.

"If you men are coming, you come!" threatened Aunty Ivy.

For the first time Orlo was regarding them fixedly. Parr felt it, coursing up and down his spine. His nerves had begun to tingle when Jason spoke of Nip. Parr was "marked" for murder. In town, it was said, the police slips would flow by him, like water under a bridge, every day, without arousing a lifted eyebrow; then, with no reason visible to an ordinary person, he would suddenly pick

out one and go into action. He had the unerring sense of murder.

"We aren't coming, Aunt Ivy," he called to her. "Something has happened up above. We'll go along, Orlo."

"I reckoned there would," said the old lady, letting the door fall to; she stared out over hill and valley. "He's got too good blood."

Parr was going to the kitchen for his cap and things, and he was surprised to find Orlo behind him. No word had been spoken, no suggestion uttered, but Jason and Oliver were unhitching the team. No one knew what had happened, but, strangely enough, every one seemed to know what to do.

Orlo took down the telephone and called a number. He nodded to Parr, while he waited. "I guess he's going off for a spell, again," he said; then, turning to the telephone: "Hello, Sam!" he cried. "Say, Sam, Catesby was riding last night. On the roan colt. It throwed a shoe, on the nigh . . . What's that?"

He cocked his head, listening intently, turning to the telephone as if it were something animate. "Yeah," he agreed, nodding; and, seeing Parr's eyes on him, he covered the mouthpiece with a hand and whispered: "They found his horse in the woods, with its head bashed in." He turned to the telephone and cried in a loud voice: "Maybe he killed it with a rock or something, himself . . . What's that? . . . I don't know. I'm going to see now. He's on foot—and barefoot, to boot."

He hung up, his hand still on the earpiece.

"They found his horse, with its leg broke and its head bashed in," he said. "Hello, Millie! Get me Johnny Hines at the Barrington depot, will you?" The station agent answered at once. No, Catesby hadn't gone out on the morning train.

He called still another number, one more of his faithful outposts.

"If Catesby comes by, let me know, will you, Henry?" he asked. To the inevitable question he would answer, "I don't know, I'm going up to see now."

Thus with a few brief strokes Orlo closed the gates of his dominions.

"What do you make of it, Orlo?" asked Parr.

"Well, when I come to think about it, I didn't like it so well," said the constable.

IN the barnyard Jason had backed out the flivver and put in an ax, a crowbar, and a log chain. They went up Town Hill and turned off that ancient thoroughfare of water bars and treacherous outcroppings of smooth granite, into an obscure alley among the trees, that plainly bore the kindly sign, "Not a road." Now the tools came in handy. There were saplings grown up to bar the path, and boulders thrust up here and there to rip out their vitals. To the city men their progress held no hint of the terrain they had traversed before dawn this morning, and it was with a start of surprise that they first caught sight of the abode of the Lorings.

It was a thousand times more forlorn by daylight. It had never been picturesque, even in its heyday. It was all wood and wood rots. The roof of one of the ells had been left to fall in, and some of the upstairs windows were open to the weather.

Orlo said: "Some one is ahead of us. The cows have been turned out."

The car halted in a little thicket, through which they examined the cold chimneys and slattern rooftrees. Orlo cupped his hands and hooted like an owl, very convincingly.

"Oooooo-oooo! Hoooo! Hoo!" he hooted, with eerie accents.

The answer came instantly, from no determinable point of the compass.

"Hooo-ooooo!" it said, in utter desolation. It was the familiar code—Uncle Charlie.

"System!" grunted Deputy Parr, in admiration. He wished he could reduce his affairs to such simplicity. He wished he might have an Orlo and an Uncle Charlie in town. He had his clever operatives, of course, with twenty thousand men to pick from. But the best of them had to be told what to do; and even his twin shadows, shabby Pelts and handsome Morel, did not work with the beautiful absence of backlash of this pair.

They left the car in the brush and walked down the ragged road. Uncle Charlie was waiting for them. He had something to show them—poor old Nip hanging on a rope's end from a beam in the hay barn. Chickens eyed them with polite, stiffnecked curiosity; a pair of shoats sunned themselves on the manure heap; pigeons cooed up above; and the barn cat rubbed itself against Uncle Charlie's legs. The kitchen door stood open, and they entered. The walls were plastered with torpid flies, waiting for morning fires that would never again be lighted. There was a bucket of new milk on the floor.

They made no effort to be quiet. There were no eavesdroppers, none to disturb. Parr, the old campaigner, used his eyes from habit. He was seeking the tell-tale marks that always attach themselves to such a spot, at such a time, from which in a flash, as on a printed page, he would read the whole story. But for him the print on this page was dim. He got the sense of the thing, but at the same time he was baffled. The great man-hunter, who throughout the adventures of the night had been trying to sponge his mind clean of the taint of murder, was clutching at it again, with the same old fervor; but here the machinery was different, the properties were different, and the reason differently informed. He found it impossible to tell himself why he knew this was murder.

"Nip followed him in," said Uncle Charlie, a little hush in his tones for the old dog. "That's what he was running."

They had a maddening way of giving you only an elliptical fragment of their thoughts, as if their few words would be the key to unlock the rest.

"Him? Who?" demanded Parr, his nostrils quivering with the scent.

"Catesby," said Uncle Charlie in surprise.

"Followed him from where?" Parr was pressing home his point.

IT was Oliver Armiston, the extinct author, to whom Parr was wont to ascribe a clairvoyant power at times, who gave the answer.

"From where the two bucks were fighting," he said. He was pulling at his white lock.

Armiston's eyes gleamed brightly. Parr knew the signs. The tips of the writer's fingers were itching, and he was yearning for his trusty typewriter. With the old machine for his medium, Oliver could build up, letter by letter a trellis of words on which his thoughts might climb and branch out like a vine. That is the way he had schooled himself to think, by writing.

Orlo and Jason had drifted out. Uncle Charlie was taking down an empty gun rack that hung above the sitting-room door. Parr scowled. Everybody seemed to know what was going on but himself.

"The two bucks?" he repeated, eying the rapt Oliver. His eye lighted. "You mean up on the hill—the thing that woke up Nip and started the row?"

"Yes," said Oliver gravely. He was intent on Uncle Charlie. Charlie was taking the gun rack to pieces. It was made, as was the custom here in the hills, of the front feet of a deer, dried and drawn up at a sharp angle to serve as the brackets.

"Catesby was up there when we were? What the devil was he doing up there?" The deputy was piecing out the problem for himself, gradually. "I thought you said no one was within five miles of us," he cried.

"I expect that's what Catesby thought, till Nip started the row!" said Oliver.

"But what was he doing up there?" barked Parr.

"Digging!" said Oliver and gave him a cold look.

"Am I right, Charlie? Wasn't he digging?"

Charlie nodded. He twisted a deer's foot out of the rack and passed it to Oliver. Armiston stared at it, puzzled. He parted the cleft hoof. A ball of red clay, still damp, was imbedded there.

"This was the two bucks fighting," said the old woodsman. "He punched the earth with that, to make it look like deer tracks, if any one happened along and saw the earth broken."

"Charlie," said Oliver slowly, "do bucks fight this time of year?"

"No. That's what fetched me back

this morning—to see what he'd been burying up there."

"And you found—his housekeeper?"

"Yes," said the old woodsman. He cast a look around the miserable house. "He was always trying to get clear of her," he said.

Oliver passed the telltale hoof, with its incriminating red clay, to Parr.

"It is a curious thing," said Armiston, in his abstracted manner, "but I have been thinking all morning that there is not a single incident that's happened, since we rolled up in our blankets to wait for old Nip to come in, out there in the Horse Pasture, that is irrelevant. It all dovetails. Everything fits. We were not up there to wait for Nip! We were waiting for Catesby Loring to come along, only we didn't know it. Nip," he cried, addressing the old dog, as if his soul still hovered about them, "we are going to hang him for you! Orlo!" Orlo was coming back. "Orlo, he wasn't asleep at all! He was faking!"

"I know it," said Orlo placidly.

"When Nip ran him in, he finished Nip and then waited for us," said Oliver. "He thought we were following him—that we came for him! When he stepped out there into the head of the lane, in the moonlight, it was to fight! With our axes and guns we were formidable enough. But I don't know—he must have been desperate—until——"

He paused, looking from one face to another.

"Until what?" cried Jason.

"Until Orlo called out to Uncle Charlie, 'Don't wake him up, Charlie.' Remember? That gave him his cue. He saw we thought he was sleepwalking. So he pretended he was sleepwalking and stalked through us and whistled in his horse. He shut his eyes. That's where he slipped up. Probably he didn't know he held his eyes wide open when he really was sleepwalking. No, of course he wouldn't."

"That's what brought me back here this morning," confessed Orlo. "I got to worrying about it."

"And this is what fetched Uncle Charlie back," said Parr, holding up the cloven hoof.

"He won't get far, barefoot," said Orlo.

But he did. He got through the lines before they were drawn.

LATE in the year, Oliver Armiston, the extinct author, came back to town and settled for the winter. He was scarcely at home when he found himself being called upon one night in December by his friend, the deputy commissioner of police, Mr. Parr. It was snowing. Parr got out of his greatcoat and was discovered to be dressed in evening attire. He made a fine figure.

"Get into your 'soup-and-fish,'" he said. "We are members of the Monday Night Opera Club." There are wheels within wheels—this Monday Night Opera Club is the very center of all the driving pinions of society. It was this club that brought over a grand duchess, with all her jewels. The deputy sat down in his favorite chair, selecting a cigar. There was something about him that caused his friend, Armiston, to move fast. Parr had the air, one might say, of the sword of Damocles. Oliver emerged handsome and very distinguished looking, with his single white lock pulled down prominently in front. They drove through whirling snow to the Metropolitan. They had a parterre box all to themselves, through some function of kingship that the police deputy possessed and occasionally exercised. On the darkened stage was occurring the altar scene from "La Vestale." The liquid voice of a great singer had finally come into its glorious own here, and Oliver was ecstatic.

But, in the midst of it, Parr plucked him by the sleeve and drew him out to the dim foyer and down the alley in the rear of the boxes. A door stood partly open; and in the cloak room of one of the parterre boxes a man sat back against the wall, asleep, or, at least, with his eyes closed, under a small light.

Parr muttered in Oliver's ear: "Shall we pick him up now? What say?"

Oliver turned on the policeman.

"Look!" commanded Parr. "Where did you see that face last?"

There could be no doubt of it. Catesby

Loring had the thin lids drawn down over his eyes, just as the lids were drawn down in that other face upturned to the moon, at the head of the sunken lane. For an instant Oliver felt the prickling in his fingers of that tense moment, and he heard the pounding of those wild hoofs. Parr was drawing him gently away. They were back in the gloom of their box again. But the opera had vanished. All his senses seemed to have gone dead. The lights came on, and the great house buzzed with life.

"It is impossible, of course!" cried Oliver. "I'm going to find out!"

"You won't," challenged Parr, following along.

"May we come in?" asked Armiston suavely, pushing open the door of the Loring box.

"Yes—yes!" drawled Catesby Loring. "It's nice to see you, my boy!"

He was as tall as the other, had the same carriage of the head, but without the magnificent mane which had made it heroic. To-night Catesby Loring wore his black hair clipped close. He might have had the same breadth of shoulders, the same barrel of a chest, but the lines of his coat discreetly suppressed their emphasis. A romantic figure, as few men can be in the clothes these tailors begrudge us! And his hands, when he met Oliver's grasp, had fingers of steel, a wrist that might have swung that ax in the stroke that buried its head in the gatepost. But the eye was mild, hopelessly bored.

The dilettante looked from one to the other. He extracted his hand from Oliver's light grasp and presented it, with his chilly smile, to Parr. Parr had a great trick of searing a guilty man with a look. Not one murderer in a thousand could withstand it. He saved it for special occasions. This was one. But now it was a dud. The exquisite Catesby rather curled his lip over Parr, the policeman, the while he pleasantly patronized Oliver, the littérateur.

"Ah, Doris!" Catesby Loring turned, as a charming girl of sixteen stepped through the curtains, and laughingly ranged herself beside her distinguished-looking parent. "My little girl! Mr. Parr—and Mr. Armiston, who is very fond of lions, especially man-eaters! Ha-ha!"

That ended the confrontation.

BACK home in Armiston's study, the two smoked in prolonged communion. Parr said finally:

"He is a cold fish!"

"It is incredible!" cried Oliver.

Parr smiled. "It is a disease," he said.

But Parr believed he had a way to break his nerve. A week later, one afternoon, Morel, the handsome man, who was given society jobs, because he was the only cop Parr had who could walk across a drawing-room floor, stopped Catesby Loring when he was coming out of a board meeting.

"The big fellow wants to see you downtown, some time," said Morel. "I think you'll catch him around four, this afternoon."

It was just four when the Loring car drew up at the curb. Catesby stepped out and went in. Parr was seated at his empty desk. His desk was always clear, as if he were waiting for something to happen. He reached out, without rising, and drew up a chair for Catesby. Catesby sat down. Parr looked at him with his professional look. Catesby withstood it, with bland surprise.

"Well?" he inquired.

Parr touched a button, and an inner door opened. Orlo and Uncle Charlie came in. They were not dressed up for the occasion. Parr had gone to considerable pains to see to that. He had plotted with Jason and sent up his car to kidnap them *au naturel,* without letting them know why, for it was quite as important for him that they be as much surprised as Catesby by the confrontation.

They came in awkwardly, all the grace of men who were used to the feel of sod underfoot, leaving them when they stepped out onto the polished floor and into the grandeur of the room. At sight of Catesby Loring they came to an abrupt stop. They showed no astonishment outwardly. They had hunted together too many years and had schooled themselves what to do in a crisis. What

to do? Do nothing! It takes nerves, and self-control. Pause, wait, see what the other fellow is going to do. Let him make the false move!

An audible sigh escaped Catesby Loring.

"Hello, Orlo," he said. "Hello, Charlie! So you've come for me?"

"Yes, Catesby," said Orlo. His tone was quiet, but he looked oddly at Parr, as if the deputy were putting some slight on him.

It was Catesby himself who took command. It was as if he had thought it all out, in readiness for this moment.

"I'd like to go back just as I have always gone back," he said. "No one around here needs to know anything about it."

He turned to Parr, as if for answer; but Parr said nothing. Catesby drummed on the arms of his chair.

"I've got a daughter," he said. "I brought her in the other night, when you were about to say something to me, just because I needed a little more time to arrange my affairs." Here he noticed Oliver, for the first time, in the shadow of the street window, and bowed slightly. "I've been training Doris all my life to expect my comings and goings, and not ask questions. There was always the chance to be considered of my not coming back. She knows what to do, if I don't."

He had a keen look of understanding for them all, one by one.

"Is there some way I can go without giving rise to comment here?" he asked, turning to Parr.

"Orlo and Charlie came down in my car," said Parr. "You will all go back together. You are in their custody."

When the door shut on the three who were going back, Parr was silent for a time. Then he said: "Somehow, he managed to put me in the wrong." And he ended it on that note.

MERELY A MATTER OF THIRST

THE kind-hearted elderly lady was calling at a hospital, to which she had gone to visit a sick friend. She was waiting in the reception room and was growing restless at the delay. Suddenly, a door opened and a man in a white coat appeared. The elderly lady at once demanded to know if he were the doctor. The "white coat" assured her that he was only a student.

"I am going out for a doctor," he told her, courteously.

A few minutes later another man in a white coat appeared.

"Young man, are you a student going out for a doctor?"

"No, mum," said the man; "I'm a painter going out for a pint."

ANOTHER GOOD MARK FOR ROVER

TWO Wyoming boys, Glenn Holder, aged eleven, and George Holmes, thirteen, after a day and most of two nights spent in an automobile stalled in the snow, in the hills northeast of Laramie, owe their lives to the devotion of a faithful dog. The boys were traveling in the car with Mr. and Mrs. Miller, who left the machine in an effort to summon aid from a distant ranch. Again and again the lads were on the point of dropping into the slumber that precedes death by freezing, but the dog would not permit them to sleep. The persistent effort of the animal to keep Holder and Holmes awake saved their lives, although they suffered severely by exposure. Mr. and Mrs. Miller perished in the snow, about three miles from the King ranch, where they expected to find aid for the boys and themselves. When the sheriff of the county reached the marooned car, the dog was licking the faces of the two boys. The sheriff had scarcely dared to hope that the boys had survived their ordeal, and he is loud in his praise of their canine friend.

A Chat With You

MR. CONVERSE CLEVELAND, writing from Asbury Park, New Jersey, has a lot of stimulating and interesting things to say about the stories we print. We don't agree with everything he says; no two people could possibly agree at all points on such a large subject as the comparative excellence of a number of good stories. But Mr. Cleveland has an angle of his own and is so original in his methods of analysis that we would rather debate with him than agree with many another man. We do not propose to let him have his say without answers of our own. So we will interrupt him from time to time and you can be the judge and the jury.

* * * *

AS the song goes in 'The Red Mill' in which Montgomery and Stone used to play," writes Mr. Cleveland, "judging stories is a matter of taste——

"'Not because you're fair, dear,
Not because you're true,
The reason that I love you is
Because you're—*you*.'

"A story has a personality. We like it or we don't. As an editor you pick a story for certain qualities. Yours is the point of view of the artisan. The author's is sometimes that of the artist. A story has a personality, like a place, like a camp fire, like a woman. We like them or don't. And to say why is some job."

* * * *

NOW, speaking of set rules, Mr. Cleveland seems to intimate that we judge stories by set rules without considering the personality. That is not so. Personality counts for everything with us. The proof of this is that our readers find distinct personality in the stories we give them. That's what we are trying for all the time.

"'Painted in Gold,'" says Mr. Cleveland, "is a very good story. The weakest point was having Ernest and Harry take that taxi outside of Joe Klondike's house. It was too open to suspicion to have a taxi unengaged there at that time."

Was it though? Perhaps taxis are rarer in Asbury Park than in New York, but in Manhattan it is hard to go far anywhere, save on a rainy day, without being able to hail a cruising taxi.

* * * *

MY objection to Knibbs," continues our critic, "is that he does not take his characters seriously enough. Knibbs personally is the kind of man who could meet any situation with a good, steady right hand and a twinkle in his eye. Most readers like his stories. But take 'The Fighting Gringo.' It is a fine story, but the characters are too much like those one meets in real life. Now, from the viewpoint of a critic who has had his imagination dulled by reading thousands of manuscripts, characters faithful in detail are much to be desired. But not to readers. We read stories to get away from the everyday. Of course, Bill Morningstar was not an everyday type. But take the girl's uncle. He was so sordid that being the girl's uncle hurt the girl. How could the girl be a source of inspiration when she has such an uncle? Of course, he was exactly true to life, but that's the trouble. The scenes in 'The Fighting Gringo' were O. K. But the uncle put the brakes on imagination. There are too many like him. Of course, the picture of Mexican life, told fairly and without prejudice, portraying its courtesy and other fine points, was done better than in any other setting forth in words that I have read."

* * * *

ANSWERING this we would say that, while it is true that we have read thousands of manuscripts. they have not dulled our imagination; they have quickened it. And Mr. Cleveland's other point, that a story is to be censored because the characters are true to life, certainly

shows an original viewpoint. We have often heard stories criticized because the characters were not true to life, but never before because they were. Then about the girl and the uncle. The most charming woman in the world might have the most disagreeable uncle. What man ever was deterred from admiring a woman because he didn't like her uncle? We have heard often of men who loved their wives devotedly but did not love their mothers-in-law. Uncles and aunts are dealt out to us by nature with an impartial hand. Sometimes they turn up aces and sometimes two-spots, but we are not to blame either way. Nobody ever tried to marry a girl that we know of just because he was fascinated by her uncle and the rule works both ways.

MR. CLEVELAND, who has shown between the lines that he likes and remembers "The Fighting Gringo," goes on with some remarks with which we entirely agree.

"We go to adventure fiction for inspiration. It is the search of the soul for experience and education. Some one has said: 'This solid world of ours is half built on dreams and vision. The stuff of the soul is idealism and it is the business of the soul to develop the faculties to preserve and express ideals.'"

We like to think that there is something of idealism implicit in the stories we give you. We try to have it so. We had only room for a small part of Mr. Cleveland's interesting letter. We thank him for it.

H A V E A C A M E L

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