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BLIND FLYERS BY J. H. GREENE

WEEKLY DEC. 24, 1927

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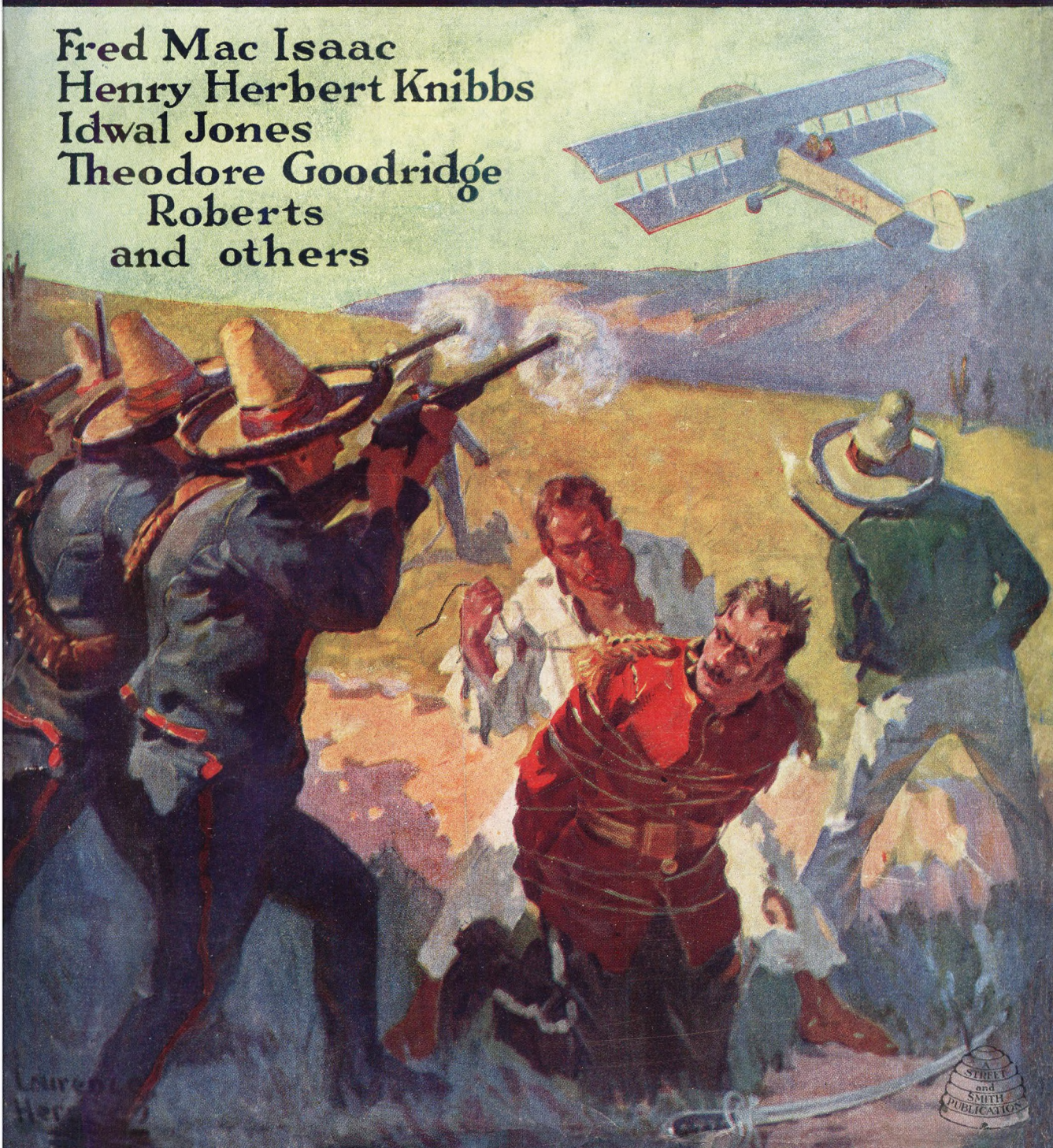

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An aviator must be fearless, but above all he must be resourceful. In Will McMorrow's novel, "High Blue," to appear next week in THE POPULAR, a young American pilot is put to the acid test of nerve and judgment. It is a story of fast, dangerous flying that will hold you with its thrills and romance.

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Blind Flyers

Author of "In Poison Valley," "Thirst," Etc.

Con Hartigan let himself in for some real excitement when he went down to meat; he knew how to make the most of it. In a particularly tight place, when it

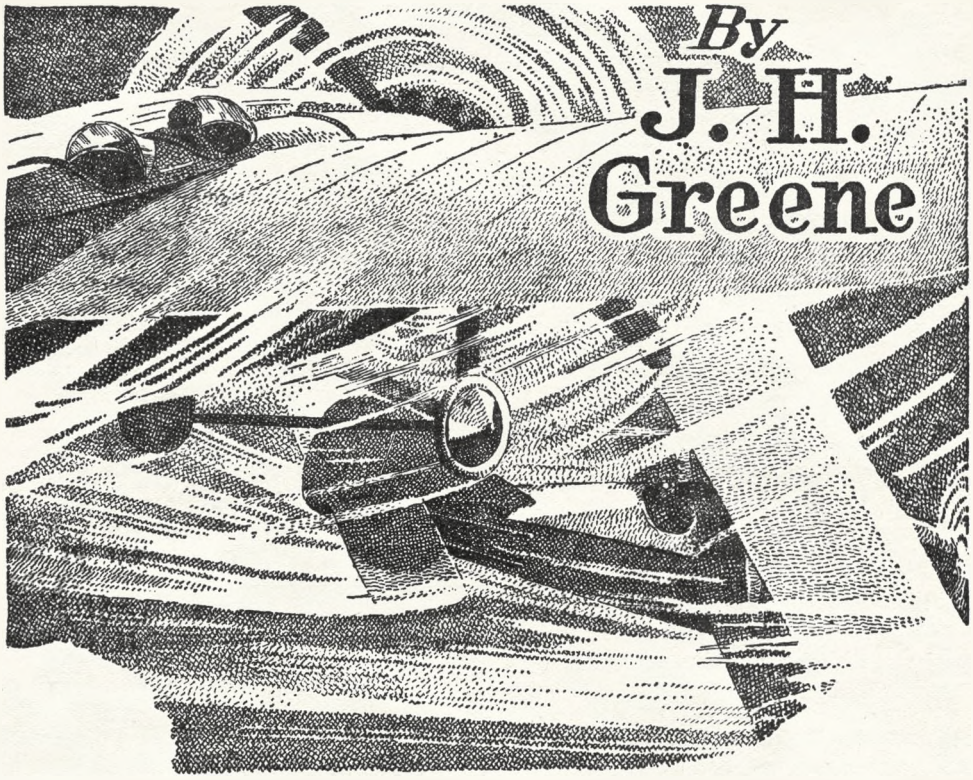
CHAPTER I.

THE AIR CRUISERS.

THE altimeter said we were about eight thousand feet up, and the compass said that we were heading east. We should have headed west, I thought, and taken our chance of dropping into the sea, even if we were not in a seaplane, even if the fog was so thick that we might drift around for days. Better fall into the sea than on the hard hills of southern California.

I was not at all sure of that altimeter, and every time the fog grew dark I thought we were crashing into a mountain. There was nothing quite sure or shipshape about that old mail plane Con Hartigan had picked up for this trip. Con taught me that every plane has ways of its own a flyer has to learn. This one, we found out from the first trial trips, acted like a mule at times, diving when she should lift, side slipping for no apparent reason and finding more air holes and pockets than there are bubbles in the sea. I would have been nervous, but for knowing Con; I had seen him fly in many ships. There was nothing with two wings and a propeller that Con could not keep in the air; and he could land with a basket of eggs in his fuselage and not crack a shell.

I did not call myself a flyer, yet. I was only the observer trying to see daylight through the mists or a level for landing below. We were running out of gas; since one of our tanks had a leak, and we had used up a lot of fuel



Mexico to teach General Savilla's officers how to fly. But excitement was Con's looked as though he and his friends were done for, he produced a first-class miracle.

trying to rise above the fog. We had to make that landing soon or gravitation would say, "Go to it!" I had my "fish" hanging below the ship at the end of my antenna; my phones were over my ears; and I was trying my best to get wireless bearings. That was all I could do; the rest was up to Con.

He was army trained; sometimes he ran into men who called him "captain." I met him when he was taking passengers for short flights from the beach at San Diego. He did not have to work; for his old man back East had plenty of money. But Con was trying to get people interested in commercial aviation, and was generally hot under the collar because they were not. He used to rave how Europe was ahead of us. He spent his private income like a sailor ashore, like a lighter-than-air man spilling ballast.

After he had cleaned me out in an all-night poker session he said he would make a flyer of me. He was really nuts on teaching people to fly. Anybody could learn, he said. Just as easy to get air sense as foot sense. If kids stopped learning to walk because they fell and barked their noses, the human race would never have got away from all fours—that was his argument. And that was why I was now up in the air with him, cruising for trouble and getting it.

Con looked back and saw me tapping the key.

"Man in Iowa wants the price of hogs," I yelled.

But it wasn't only flying took me up

in that bus; it was the man at the joy stick. I liked Con. Something was happening, when he was about. You were always sure of a good time, when you trailed with him. He was small and chunky, but packed a wallop, and was light on his feet as a canary. He was as sloppy as a scarecrow in his dress—said he wanted to unbutton, after the army. His manners were just the same to the kitchen help in the big hotel he flew from, as to the swell dames on the piazza, who thought he was a hero. Just a rackety rich man's son, I figured, who had taken up flying as a new kind of cocktail.

At first I never understood how such a rowdy high spotter could be a flyer. I wanted him every day taking off from the beach after a late sitting over the chips, with liquor that gave you five aces in each hand. I could hear his cargo of flappers squawking up in the sky, and looked for him to flop every minute. If he had, it would have been my job to put out in a motor boat and tow him in; for I was caretaker, watchman and roustabout to the yacht club close by.

Well, to get back to the fix we were in, up there in the plane. I got a ham in Los Angeles, and had just shot my Q. S. A. when the fellow cut off, saying he had to go to work. All I wanted to know was where there was some sunshine; and he kept asking me what coils I was using. I kept turning my dials to get a responsible station; but nothing came except the usual ship stuff—no good for us. My headpiece was workink like a badly wired receiver, taking in the wave lengths of everything that could happen.

I kept thinking of that yacht club, where my principal job was looking after motors, and seeing that the yachtsmen who came in from cruising in Mexican waters knew how to buoy their cargoes when the coast guards were around, and how to carry their other cargoes ashore and sleep them off in the clubhouse. My worst trouble was not to get fired more than twice a day by old Commodore Hastings, who owned and ran the club like an admiral's flagship—all white paint, new manila, and clean gangways for the ladies.

He used to take boatloads of white-ducked dudes to his yacht, the *Osprey,* a sloop carrying no power. Hastings hated power boats, but of course the club had to allow them. He used to take these fellows out to show them how much more fun they could have out of canvas. He hated that aviation company that Con flew for, too. He and Con used to scrap all the time—Hastings swearing from the deck of the *Osprey,* and Con seeing how low he could fly over her. Con slipped away the pennant from the mast one day with the breeze from his propeller; and Hastings was for filling him with buckshot. I got fired that afternoon for showing Con over the yacht club. But the committee could not do without me; for most of them owned motor boats. That's where a mechanic has the bulge.

It was after I took my first flight with Con, that I saw he was a different man, once he climbed into the cockpit. His grin got hard, like a jockey's; he did not cuss or laugh now, but spoke soft and steady. I knew then that he was a mechanic, too. The way he played with all those gadgets told me he was careful enough on his job. I saw the beach slip away and the horizon dance; but I felt quite at home. Con did not do any stunts or go very high that first trip. He dropped the hydro to the sea level, till you could hear the water splashing the bottom of the fuselage—but so slick you couldn't tell whether you were flying or swimming. Then he rose again, till you felt you had wings sprouting from your shoulder blades; and then he did a splash landing—not clumsy enough

to fill us, but just to shoot us bobbing along on our own waves, as they curled up alongside the cockpit. We slowed down, and you could see the propeller coming clear out of its fog. When I came ashore I felt as if I'd had some real prewar, but no headache coming.

I took more flights, and began to get acquainted with the bus and its works. Never could see any kind of machine without wanting to know all about it.

Then Lola Savilla came in, with her interference; and when a snappy-eyed dame with a cooling voice that no man can say "no" to gets between buddies, something goes wrong with the ignition She got me out of the yacht club for keeps; and got Con out from his company.

Well, my receiving was not too good, especially up in the air with the wind howling in the struts and the propeller roaring and great blobs of fog turning into rain. I was nervous because I was inefficient—too new at this end of radio, and not enough boss of my tools. Con said I was good enough for him, but that was Con's way. If he liked you, he would stand for anything, and back up your errors every time.

"Something in Spanish," I yelled to him. "Hell of a lot of good that is. We haven't gas enough to make Tia Juana."

"Broadcast for a hundred-acre field and sunshine," he answered.

My mention of Spanish made Con snap his jaws; for Lola was Spanish, and she was still a sore spot between us. Con gave the bus all the gun he could; that girl getting into his ignition was liable to crash us into the first hill we came to, no matter how cool a flyer he was.

I remembered how Lola had come dancing down the float of the yacht club, that first day I met her, and asked me if I could take her out to the *Zampa,* a forty-footer owned by some movie man. I figured right away she was some movie woman, though she made all the screen queens I'd seen do a quick fade-out. Of course I said I'd take her to the Philippines if she wanted me to. So we got into the boat; and I slipped into high in getting acquainted. She was easy to talk to. Told me her father was on that yacht. She didn't seem to mind that I was all oiled up and messy—I had just been taking a motor apart. Well, I sure fell strong for a girl who was so democratic and yet looked as if she'd been born with a crown on. I put her on board of the yacht, after swabbing my hands with waste.

She came often, after that, and I got in the habit of taking her on little cruises. I got some clothes for special jobs like this, and was doing fine—when Con butted in.

One morning I came down to the club to keep a date with her; but she was not there. Con was out flying over the bay. I could not make out if he had many passengers. He hit the water in his star style; then skidded his bus along the smooth sea toward the *Zampa.* I saw him come out of the cockpit. There was only one passenger with him—a girl. When he helped her along his wing to the deck of the yacht, I blew out all my fuses; for, of course, the girl was Lola. Then Commodore Hastings came out of the club and, seeing me all dolled up, began handing out his orders.

"I want the *Lucky's* cabin varnished," he said. "The owners have just wired. Start it right away."

"Varnish nothing," I said. I'm hired to attend to engines."

"Well, her engines need an overhaul, too. Her cylinder needs new packing."

He held out the wire, grinning. I knew he was wise to the whole affair—Con cutting me out, and me in my new ducks and sport sweater.

"You can give me my time," said I. "I'm through."

After I got my money I went down to the beach and laid for Con. He had taken the air again and started doing stunts right over the yacht; with Lola, her white-haired father and others watching him. What chance had I against Con's wheel spins and nose dives? He was staging an air circus to make his hit with her.

I waited till he had skidded his ship to the beach and moored her. He hopped out on the sand and came toward me with a smile on his face. There was never a man, child or dog that could keep mad for long, when Con grinned like that. I didn't sail into him as I had intended.

"Jim," he says, "you and me ain't going to fight over a girl; even a peach like her."

"It was a low-down trick," said I. "Haven't you got the pick of the beach? She had a date with me; and besides, you got me fired."

"Good," he said, laughing. "I've got a better job for you. I met her father before I took her up. That flight was partly business. He's interested in aviation and wants me to start a school down in Mexico. How about coming with me, as mechanic? I'll be on the level with you, Jim, and admit I'm just as strong for her as you are. She's coming with him; so we can both start fair."

"How can we?" said I. "You'll be taking her up in the air and making a monkey out of me."

"You can take her up, too. I'll soon make a flyer out of you. You'll learn all I know. But we won't fight over her. We'll keep our fighting for the air. That's all I'm going to fight now."

He looked up at the blue sky, at the gulls that knew more about flying than he did, at thin bits of clouds miles above. Something in his face got me. I was quite sure Con would make a flyer of me, and I was just as certain he would play fair about the girl. He was that kind of sport.

So here I was now, ten thousand feet up in the air, blind flying in a fog, on a bus Con had bought in San Francisco and was taking down to Mexico, with an even chance that in a few minutes we would be demonstrating that when men lose their fight against the air they are merely falling bodies under the law of accelerated motion.

"She's breaking," I heard him call. And at the same moment my fish caught in something and the aërial tore away from the bus.

The fog parted; and my heart changed its beat, when I saw we were flying in a canyon, close enough to the ground to catch my fish, and heading toward a tall butte. The fog grew thinner as the canyon funneled the wind. Con climbed at a steep angle, risking a stall, and had reached halfway up to the level of the top of the butte, when he pointed to the oil gauge. We were running out of oil! We had to land immediately; but below us was nothing but rocks—big bulging boulders—not an acre of flat land in sight.

The canyon was too narrow for us to turn in. We just had two finishes: a head smash into the butte, or a crash on those rocks below. Funny, but I wasn't a bit scared, after the first big jump inside me. I just sat still, watching Con and wondering which way he would take. I didn't think of Lola; and my whole past life did not rush past me like a movie. Con kept on racing the plane toward the butte, on no oil and no gas; we must have been making a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

Suddenly the butte divided; what seemed to be one rock was two, with a cleft in the middle. I thought Con would make for that cleft on his last few drops of gas, in the hope that there might be a patch of level ground somewhere beyond. But the engines

stopped; the last drop had gone. We were just gliding; our speed would keep us up for a while. Then, instead of making for the gap, he headed that bus right into the face of the mountain. It was a perpendicular cliff; not a brush to hold her nose. It seemed as if Con was looking for two smashes in one. But I didn't holler—funny, wasn't it? I closed my eyes, then opened them; I was ashamed to crash blindfolded.

The bus headed nose-on toward that face of red rock, which seemed to grow higher than any mountain ever could be; when suddenly the plane lifted, without a beat of her engines, almost straight up, about five hundred feet; and we were carried out of the canyon, over the butte to the other side of the range, seeing miles of valley below us. We were saved; but it was a miracle to me.

"How did you do it, Con?" I yelled.

"Always big vertical air currents up mountainsides to windward," he called back. "That Thoret's trick. Didn't you notice how the fog went?"

I had seen little trails of fog climbing up the sides of the butte; but only Con could have guessed there was enough air to blow us out of the canyon; only Con would have been quick enough to remember what that clever French ace had found out about air currents.

"It's bad enough, still," he called. "We've got to land."

He was right. The lee side of those hills were full of the rough airs that green hands think are air pockets. The plane dived and ducked and dipped like a log in the surf. How Con ran her without power, I could not guess. We were just shooting through the air like a sheet of paper and would drop when that wind died down. There seemed not much chance of a landing here, either. The foothills were rocky; and I didn't see how we could keep up till we reached those towns and fields I could make out far away.

Then below us, on the red and yellow earth, I saw wide patches of pink and green. We were over a farm. Those squares of cultivation were cornfields and peach orchards; but still there was no cleared land for us. Con wheeled the bus round. He could have dropped right into the trees, where we might spike on the branches, and certainly lose our wings, but have a chance for our lives. But he bore away as if he was trying to climb. He was working his ailerons as a sea gull does going into the strongest wind with just a flutter of its wings.

Then he zoomed right down in one long sweep; and I saw he was heading for the corn patch. We landed just as if that corn was smooth water. I believe the bus bounced. The tassels of the corn came over the cockpit like a green sea. The propellers had slowed down and just cut up the leaves. We finally stopped, with the cornstalks crunching under us and nice fat, juicy cobs hanging over the side.

"I don't believe we've strained a strut," said Con. "The squash landing and no gas did it. If our engine had been going those cobs would have smashed our propeller."

I knew that a pebble blown from the ground or a sparrow on the wing would sometimes do that.

We heard voices calling out somewhere; then I could see men pushing through the corn.

"They're killed, I guess, Bud," some one shouted.

"No; we're only hungry. Got any coffee?" called Con, as two men pressed through the stalks up to our cockpit.

They were terribly excited and could hardly believe we were not smashed to bits. But Con at last persuaded them that all we needed was gas, oil, chow and a bunk. Even then, they almost wanted to carry us out of the field; they

helped us over the fence into the peach orchard, like first-aid cops. The old farmer looked back a minute on his ruined corn, but said nothing. Con guessed what he was thinking.

"Of course we'll pay you for all this damage," he said. "Give me your estimated loss."

"That's all right," said the farmer.

The young man, Bud, a long slab of a native son, had rushed to our rescue carrying a camera. Now we were out of the corn, he wanted us to pose for him.

"What for?" said Con, keeping moving and holding his hand over his face.

"Why, he sells them pictures," said the old man. "You fellers ain't escaping from nowheres, are yer? Ain't dope peddlers?"

"Of course not," said Con. "We're just flyers out on a cruise. Got lost in that fog."

You could see the fog now, way back in the hills, bulging over the edges of the ranges like great white balloons. How we got through without hitting any of those peaks only Con knew.

"I'll buy those pictures from you for double what any press syndicate pays you," he went on to the photographer, who had just snapped the plane. It would be some story for any paper—that fall of ours into the corn patch, and I did not see just then why Con wanted to kill the publicity he was usually a shark for. Con had to produce money before Bud agreed not to snap any more and handed over the films of those he had already taken.

"You see," went on Con, working all his camouflage of grins, "we're commercial aviators demonstrating a new type of plane; and it won't help our business if the public learns we had to light. We're supposed to be fool proof and fog proof." With this bluff and the money the farmers were satisfied, and asked us over to their house.

"Got a radio, I see," said Con, seeing the antennæ across the garden.

But I saw it was no ordinary amateur listening-in outfit. There were a hundred feet of enameled wire, a counterpoise ground, navy insulators, properly braced masts—all high-grade work. Real professional stuff, this!

"Yes. I'm station AE23KY," said Bud, with a grin as large as Con's. "And I could have your story on all next editions in two minutes."

But Bud was quite satisfied to give up the story, when Con began talking radio to him. Con could sell himself talking radio, the same as he could talking flying. I didn't talk. I'm only a mechanic—all I know is in my fingers. And besides, I was all in.

A pleasant, elderly woman and a girl met us at the door. They couldn't do enough for us. The mother wanted her husband to drive off at once and get a doctor till Con persuaded her that breakfast and a rest were all we needed. We could prove to them that we were not broken in twenty pieces, only by eating all the eggs and hot cakes they put before us. Con did what talking there was, just explaining how we'd run out of gas in the fog. I said nothing. I was going to ask Bud why he didn't get my call last night but I was too tired. Con did, though; and Bud said he couldn't have been on our wave length, as he was all the evening talking to a cousin back in Virginia.

They showed us to a room, where I just flopped on the bed, too tired to undress, too tired to talk or think. But Con seemed as spry as if he was just taking off.

"That corn will have to be reaped clean before we can get up," he said. "I'll borrow the old man's car this afternoon and get some gas and oil from San Matea. We're only ten miles away. I want to send a wire, too."

"Why don't you use Bud?" I said.

"I don't want everybody in America to get it. I don't even know if this fellow is in the A. R. L."

I knew at once that Con wanted to wire to Lola; but I was too dog-gone tired to care. Seemed to me I had left her somewhere up in the air in that fog bank.

"You can overhaul the ship while I'm away," he went on. "You know enough, Jim. All I'll have to do will be to give her the once-over. You'll have a good time here. Nice people, these Lawsons; and that girl is a peach."

"What girl?" I said, hardly hearing him.

"The farmer's daughter, Elsa Lawson."

He nearly got me awake again. I wanted to laugh and kid him. Con had just fallen out of the clouds, where one girl had sent him; and now he was falling for another. I couldn't remember what this Elsa looked like. I didn't want to try to. All I wanted was sleep on something fast to the ground, with no risk of falling any farther than off the bed

CHAPTER II.

AN ANXIOUS WORLD.

THAT afternoon Con drove off in the Lawson car; old Lawson let him have it without any question. That was what always happened; no man ever took Con Hartigan into his house without throwing it wide open. Before going, Con paid for the damage to the corn from a big roll he always carried when flying. But he almost had to force the money on Lwson.

Then the family and I went out to look at the bus. She was not at all damaged. Her landing wheels were choked with cornstalks, which I cleaned away so that they would run free for the take-off. Bud and his father got scythes, and began cutting away the corn and hammering the earth, so that we could have a clean run. They wouldn't let me help.

Then Elsa began asking me about the controls of the plane, and she soon took me up higher than Con had ever carried me.

Say what you like about those snappy-eyed foreign women like Lola; they are paprika, chile con carne, great stuff to play with. But give me a quiet girl that don't make eyes at you, that you can talk plain language to, that you don't have to flirt with, because you're on a higher wave length.

That was Elsa; and she soon had Lola way back among my discards. I helped her into the fuselage and showed her how the bus was worked. She was quick to get everything, from the gun to the bank indicator. Give me a dame who can get the dope on something mechanical and I wire up with her strong. Those lip-stick sirens can keep on their silver sheets as far as I'm concerned. Sitting there among the corn, she looked as if she grew out of it, with her hair yellower than the cobs. Her blue eyes were as glad to look at as that clear sky I had sighted coming out of the fog.

I felt I could teach her to fly in five lessons. And she was crazy to learn —no, not crazy; there was nothing crazy about her. She didn't make me feel crazy either; she made me feel safe. With that kind of girl, you can make any altitude and your bus has to keep up.

When I went back to supper I made up my mind to quit flying for farming. When you meet a girl like that you begin to think serious. I'd been a drifter all my life, running from one job to another, since I came out of that automobile school in Kansas City. First a garage in Seattle, till that went out, from competition and fellows underselling your gas; then a machine shop in Portland, till that got tiresome, after I'd learned all I wanted; then big money driving a booze car across the border, till that nearly landed me in stir; then I went into the radio game and opened a shop with a fellow in San Francisco, till that blew up; then the yacht club.

Girls were always mixed up in these little switches of mine. Some were all right, some dead wrong. Lola was my best bet, till Elsa came along. It's always been that way with me; and with most other fellows, too. There's usually a girl at the switch that turns you one way or the other.

This job of Con's was all right; but it was too like Con—too much blind flying; and the money end was uncertain. All I knew was that Lola's father, General Savilla, governor of somewhere, wanted to give aviation a boost in his home town. The flight to Brazil had set all those foreigners going so that they thought they could beat us. That was enough to start Con.

But I'm a quiet, steady chap, who only wants a pay envelope every Saturday night, and a wife and kids to spend it on: I'm not looking for trouble as a regular diet, like Con. As I was showing Elsa the dials of the controls, I was really overhauling my own engine. There was something wrong with my beat; too many loose nuts, I decided. And I made up my mind to moor somewhere for a permanent landing.

After supper Bud asked me out to see his radio shack; and Elsa gave me a jolt by saying she hated radio. That dropped her down nine points. I had met so many of those highbrow dames who think radio's only a kid toy. It hurt me some to find Elsa was coupled to such a dumb idea.

"He does nothing but sit out in his old shack night after night," she said. "He won't dance any more, or drive me anywhere, because he has some fellow back East or North or South to talk to—some one he's never seen and never will see."

"That's where the fun comes in," laughed Bud. "I don't have to see them. When I get their fists I know all about them."

"We had to take his breakfasts out to his shack when MacMillan was up in the arctic," said his mother.

"And it was spraying time, too," said the farmer.

"And he lost ten pounds," said the mother.

"But I got MacMillan, didn't I? And I make my expenses by keeping you in touch with market reports, don't I, dad?"

I could see the old folks were proud of the kid, as they ought to be. And I felt better about Elsa. She was not a resistance; she was just a girl needing a beau to take her out. Bud was not in resonance with her, that was all. This Lawson family needed a coupler to take in that girl's wave lengths, and I saw myself fitting in the set very nicely.

"Don't he tune in dance programs?" I asked her.

There was a high-priced cone horn on the table; and I could see it was hooked up through the window to the shack outside by an extension.

"Aw, what's the use of jazz?" said Bud. "I'll see if there's anything worth while on."

He went out to the shack. Soon the children's hour came out of the horn with good power and quality. Elsa made a face at it.

"There you are," said Bud, when he came back. "Not worth wasting B battery on. Come out, old man, and hear me get Africa. Got a new station last night at Pietermaritzberg."

I had to follow the short-wave bug; for I, too, was just breaking away from broadcasting into real radio.

The shack was a little shed covered with tar paper. Inside there was just room for two of us. But one sight of the layout on the table, the broadcast receiver that carried into the house, the short-wave receiver and sender, the neat wiring, the layout of the dials, the card from the A. R. L. with the call letters of the station and the name of its owner, Buddington Lawson, the wall stuck with

verification cards that came from all over the world from Cairo to New Zealand, told me that this kid was more of a man in radio than I was. When he started taking me round his circuits, showing me the generator under the table worked by a little gas engine, the storage batteries, with everything figured out in formulas and diagrams, I wanted to ask some of those highbrows who won't buy radio sets if it's only a kid's game.

Bud talked radio the same as Con talked flying; only he didn't get excited like Con; he just said things, and you saw them happen.

Then he coupled up an extra pair of phones, handed one to me, and began tapping at his sending key.

"That chap over in Kentucky wants me to play checkers with him," he said.

I was not very quick at the code but I could hear Bud say that he couldn't play to-night, because he was trying to get the row in China. He'd often got Japan, he told this man, and knew it was Japanese, because a Jap friend of his up the valley had read it for him.

He shut off this fellow and began turning his dial to another. Then I heard code that made me pay extra attention; for I read something about aviators.

"Get that repeated, Bud," I asked. The sending was too quick for me.

"That's the Southern Pacific Press Syndicate," he said, "asking for news of two missing aviators seen yesterday heading into a fog."

Sure enough it was; the whole country was jerking juice to get news of us. Everybody knew Con Hartigan and was asking about the dare-devil stunt flyer, who must have come to grief somewhere.

"What do you want me to kill this story for?" asked Bud, with his fingers trembling on the sending key.

"Con said 'no,' and he's the boss."

"What's his idea? I don't get it."

"Don't get it exactly, myself. But he's the boss."

"Thought you didn't like bosses?" he said.

"I don't, but Con is different," I replied.

But I felt a little sore with myself, because when I had told Elsa about Hastings she had given me a little pat on the hand that tickled like fifty volts, and said I was quite right. She said a man ought to do without bosses and strike out for himself. Yet here I was blind flying with Con again, and doing whatever he told me.

"I see no sense," grumbled Bud, "in not letting the papers know where you are. Jamming the air up with a lot of useless talk. Think of the amperage you're wasting."

"Well, you're not losing anything. He paid you for what you lost," I said sharply. I was afraid he would start sending; but he didn't.

"Not sore, are you, Jim?" he asked, turning his dials somewhere else.

"Not a bit," says I.

I was sore with myself. Elsa and Bud had made me see that I had no initiative. I always waited for somebody to tell me something. I would never amount to a row of tin tacks. Just because Con Hartigan wanted to play possum, I was letting the whole world think us smashed; perhaps dead on the hills. Of course nobody was asking much for me; I was not in the limelight like Con. But I had relatives back East; and I didn't want to-morrow's papers to carry my obituary.

I came out of the shack to get a breath of air; that key tapping was getting on my nerves. It was a lovely night. Old lady Climate had all her stars out. I looked up at them, and then at the windows of the house, where I could see Elsa reading. I wondered what she would think if she knew the air over her head was advertising my death on all available wave lengths. I

wondered if she was thinking of me at all. Bud had said the next step in radio would be for man to acquire an electric sense; then we'd all be human transmitters and receivers. I had laughed at this as more magazine bunk; till he showed me how the big fellows were trying to experiment along this line by shutting men up to try and broadcast their thoughts.

Somehow it seemed possible now; and I tried my best to tune into Elsa, looking hard at her pretty blond head in the window and saying to myself, and to her, if it could reach her: "Elsa dear, I just want to wire onto you on this old farm; and I'll never go flying any more."

But I must have been a very bad transmitter; for she didn't even look out of the window. She just turned a page of the book and helped herself to another chocolate.

Then I heard a car coming along the road and saw headlights. I guessed it was Con and went out to meet him.

"Got the oil and gas, Jim," he said, right away. "Can we take off?"

"The bus is all right; but you and me are dead."

Then I told him what was coming in on the antenna. He said nothing as we walked toward the shack.

"Did you send your wire?" I asked, hoping that telegram would let leak out the news that we were all right.

"Yes; no reply; parties had left."

"Bud wanted to let the papers know where we were. And honest, Con, I don't like the idea of being reported missing. And won't that wire give us away?"

"It won't, Jim. I didn't sign my right name and I used a private code."

"What in thunder for?" I said, mad at all this undercover stuff.

"Business," he said, high-hatting me as bad as old Commodore Hastings.

He opened the door of the shack. I made up my mind I was going to know more about that business, before I went farther on this wild-goose chase to nowhere for nothing.

"Any more inquiries about us, Bud?" asked Con quite casually.

"Sure. Air's thick with them. Your bodies have been found."

"What?"

"Oh, you don't know news relayers. They take a story and amplify it in any old ratio. An old plane was picked up all burned somewhere in Nevada. There were bones near it. Some say yours, some say a mule's. Ain't much difference, I'd like to tell the world. Hello, here's Mexico worrying about you now."

"Mexico?" said Con, all keyed up.

"Yes, 2XWG," said Bud. "I get this fellow sometimes. A regular lid. Got a glass wrist. Fist is awful. He wants to know if it's true that you're killed."

"Yes, I can hear him," said Con, reading the code as he listened up close to Bud's phone. "Tell him—— Hold on a bit, Bud—where is this fellow?"

"Station 2XWG—Mexico, I tell you," said Bud impatiently.

"But what part of Mexico?" said Con, just as mad.

"I don't know. What's it matter?"

Bud's geography was the log of the stations he received; he couldn't get it into his head that Con wanted the actual location of that Mexican sender; the wave length and call letters were enough for him.

"Look on the map there," he said. "There's pins stuck for all my stations."

Con found the pin he wanted in the big map of North America on the back of the door and read a name off the map.

"Oriente," he said looking at me as if I should guess what all this meant.

"That's the place," said Bud. "I forgot it. There are silver mines down there; and this chap at 2XWG is the engineer. You'll find his name in my

log. I can't remember it. He's the rottenest sender I get. Don't keep on his wave length, either; but they do what they like down there. We've got to have international control for guys like 2XWG. Our league's got to do it."

Con paid no attention. He was listening to that code and had his ten-thousand-feet-in-the-air look on. He put his hand on Bud's wrist, which was hanging loose over the key.

"Bud," he said quietly, "take this message from me, will you?"

But before Bud could lift his fingers, Con had grasped them.

"No. Better let me send it, Bud," he said, trying to push Bud out of the way as if he was pilot of this shack. That was where he made a mistake, the kind he was liable to; when Con was set on anything all traffic had to move off the road.

Bud grabbed his wrist and pushed Con back against the wall.

"Say, what do you think you're trying to do?" he said. "No messages go from this station but what I send. Who are you fellows, anyway, busting into our corn patch and telling me what I'm to send and what I'm not? Are you bootleggers? They do carry liquor in planes. If you are, count me out. I won't give you away, if you behave like human beings, but another crack like that and I'll send a general alarm!"

Con began to back water in that quick, easy way of his.

"We're not bootleggers, Bud, and no sheriff wants us. We're just flyers. But if you don't send that message or let me send it, you're liable to cause a lot of trouble."

"What trouble?" said Bud. "I ought to tell this fellow you're alive. Him and me swap news. He works for a Mexican news agency."

"I don't want to be considered alive," said Con, barking like an exhaust. "If he wants news tell him we're dead."

"I don't get this," said Bud, looking suspiciously at Con. "Here's the best scoop I ever pulled off; and you want to kill it."

"Well, it's army business, if you must know," said Con. "I'm Captain Hartigan on the reserve. This man, my mechanic, is Sergeant Crewe. We're on a special mission. There are my papers."

I had to play up to Con, and didn't start at being enlisted without my knowing it. Con pulled out a pocketbook and flashed a lot of papers with all sorts of high-hat military dog on them. Some of them were Con's old war papers; and they scared Bud, who didn't stop to read them.

"We're not at war with them?" he asked.

"We're not, but we're likely to be," said Con. "I can't tell you any more about it; but the army is just as often trying to stop wars as to make them. I've got to get into Mexico without the news being spread all over the yellow sheets. Don't want everybody in Mexico to know it, either. Now will you send that message?"

That did the trick. Bud turned to his key and said:

"Shoot."

Con was about to dictate when Bud looked up with a grin.

"Say, there's a girl asking for you now, cap. Said she knew you in San Diego."

I never saw a man hold up a bluff with such a hard-boiled face as Con did then. I knew the girl must be Lola for I remembered Oriente was where she told me she lived. Con had not got an answer to the wire he had sent her in San Diego; so she must be in Oriente with her father. And the operator down there must have got the rumors about our deaths.

But Con did not bat an eye, not even to me, though he must have known I guessed who was inquiring. He just smiled at Bud.

"Well, there are women operators, aren't there, Bud?" he said. "Don't you log all your DX girls?"

Bud smiled; so I knew Con had him eating out of his hand. He sent the message that the latest news about the aviators was that they had crashed somewhere in the Sierras and were certainly killed.

"And now, Bud, remember this," said Con. "When the real story does break you will get the first call. I appoint you as special correspondent. You can consider yourself a private wire to our affairs. But keep mum till we say release."

Bud promised with eyes that told me Con had sworn him in as friend and ally for keeps. Con was as good a mechanic with human material as with any other.

"Now, Jim," said Con, "we hop off."

"To-night?" I asked.

"As soon as we can fill the tanks."

He went out to the car, and I followed. I had half made up my mind to quit this job; for I thought Con would be held up here long enough to get another mechanic. And if I did go with him, I wanted to know more about this expedition. Of course it was Elsa pulling at my switches.

"What's the hurry, Con?" I asked. "What's all this dime-novel stuff—pretending to be dead? It was a good bluff pulling those papers on the kid; but what's the idea?"

We were now out in the corn patch, and Con was going over the plane with an electric torch, examining the wings for warps with an eye like a surveyor's. Two nice, hard furrows ran from under the wheels the whole length of the field, and a wide swath of corn was cut clear on each side. The hop-off would be good. But I wanted to know why, where and what for.

"It wasn't exactly a bluff, Jim," he said. "Lola's father is governor of Oriente. He wants us to teach aviation to his army. But if the generals to the south get wind of it too soon, it may start something before he is ready. General Savilla might get a call to Mexico City and a knife in the back."

I suspected there was something like that in this game.

"See here, Con," I said. "I'm not going to be dragged into any politics. We're liable to get knives in the back, too."

"We won't. They need our knowledge too much. We're just airmen; and there's no politics in flying. If they choose to drop a few bombs from their machines, it will be when we're not in them. You're not going to quit me flat now, are you?"

I had not said I was; but Con was quick as a flash to see what a fellow meant. Then Elsa came out of the cottage and called to ask us if we would have a bite before we started. Bud had told her we were taking off. Con answered her; and then grinned at me.

"I get you, Jim," he said. "You've fallen for the simple life on the farm. Hell! Jim, I never thought you'd weaken for a woman."

"No more than you, Con. You're only taking this job because of Lola."

I knew I had him then.

"I wonder?" he laughed, looking up at the stars that were now shining clear and near. The wind was light and southerly. It was a lovely night for the bus to make her top speed.

"You can't bluff me, Con," I said. "It was Lola asking for you on the radio. Don't try to bluff me by saying it's just for flying."

"I'm trying not to bluff myself, Jim. Lola's a dream; but we're grown men, buddy. Time for dreams is over. I've got more gray hairs coming after last night. I admit I took a nose dive into her black eyes, but I'm not exactly a fool, Jim. My days of stunt flying are over. I'm looking for safety now, in flying and in women."

"Why did you let her think you were killed?" I asked.

"I said I was looking for safety in women," he said slowly, talking like a wise old man. "She got me going, wig-wagging those eyes of hers. I was dazzled, I admit. But she's a red-hot patriot, as well as a woman. How do I know I was not being strung? Thinking I'm killed may make her show her hand."

"Con," said I, "you're above the sky."

"Got to be, buddy, with women."

Elsa then called from the kitchen that the coffee was made. Con answered that we were coming.

"You run ahead, Jim," he whispered, "and moor up to that girl before we start. I'll give you five minutes. You can do it, or I don't know you. You'll come with me then, won't you?"

"Sure," I answered, wanting to say that I would follow a man like him to the last crash on a ten-thousand-foot drop.

I caught Elsa coming toward us, and drew her under the peach trees. I proved Con wrong in his timing, for it took me only three minutes to make that mooring. There are no new stunts in gearing up with the right girl. One thing I learned at the auto school and in every game I've tackled, and that is: Once you're down to bed rock certainty, you don't have to bother with fancy flying. Certain things have to be done and said, and they're all dead straight and simple. In four minutes Elsa had promised she would marry me when I came back; and the other minute was spent on—well, that's nobody's business.

We had the whole family to see us take off, with the old man and Bud holding lights so that Con could keep to the furrows. We lifted clean over the peach trees. The propeller churned up the scent of the blossoms. It seemed as if Elsa was throwing bouquets at us; and I could smell those peaches when we were miles in the air and heading south for the border. I was charged up enough to face anything to help Con to his Lola.

CHAPTER III.

MEXICO.

WE were far into Mexico by daylight. The tops of the hills were bare and yellow, like those of southern California. The valleys were still too full of shadows for us to see any signs of life. Away to the east were the waters of the Gulf and across the land farther we could see the Pacific.

As the sun began to creep down the sides of the hills, we saw dobe villages, white streaks of roads that looked as if they'd been laid out by wandering mules, and cultivated clearings. We flew lower and people came out of the houses and looked up at us. Con pointed out a patch of smoke; and I could see some red chimneys, a creek that looked like a long white snake, and some oil tanks.

"The mine—Oriente," he roared at me over the noise of the propeller and the wind whistling in the struts.

Out of a large white house with a red roof and a lot of greenery all around it, we saw more people come. They were waving flags. Con kept wheeling, looking for a landing. There were open spaces enough; but there might be telegraph wires we could not see. He could not count on the wires keeping to the roads, as they would at home. I thought I heard a whistle blowing and a bell ringing, as I strained my ears. Then, behind the sheds of the mine, we saw something that said, "This way." It was a monoplane on an open field. Her tail was turned toward the little hollow by the creek; and that was guide enough for Con. He slid down toward that plane and made a beautiful landing on level ground without a stump or a stone, a perfect field.

As we taxied on our wheels I saw that the plane had a broken wing; and we stopped right under a power wire run-

ning from the mine to the white house up on the opposite hill. If we had tried for the field from the other side we would have crashed into that wire. As usual, Con was both lucky and wise. We stopped just by the door of a big shed, which, I could see housed mining machinery and a light plant. A man came out and ran up to us. He gave us his left hand; for his right arm was in a sling.

"Welcome to Oriente, Señor Capitán; I'm glad the rumor of your fall was false."

He was dressed in an olive shirt and ducks. At first I took him for a mechanic; for he was greased up a bit. He was very tall and big, with a pasty, yellow skin and a small black mustache. He spoke English very well, but with little bits of Spanish thrown in.

"I'm sorry I spread the news too soon. I received it over the wireless that night," he said. And he gave us a hand, which we were glad to take—for we were tired and stiff. It was some hand, too; the big fellow had muscle.

Of course this was the radio operator Bud had talked to last night; but, of course, Con said nothing about the message. The fellow seemed pleasant. Folks generally are at the first crack. It isn't until you dig into their works, that you find out what their make is.

"My name is Xibera—Gonsalves Xibera," he said. "I am the engineer of the mine—the famous silver mine of Oriente."

He waved his hand at that tumbledown layout of shacks, at the stone chimneys with grass in their cracks, at the office with the door on one hinge, at the windows without glass. I wondered what such a ruin had done to be called famous. There was no smoke coming out of the chimney; the plant was run on oil. The smoke came from a pile of rubbish that was burning some way off. But when I saw those oil tanks outside that shack I felt better; they looked like home.

By this time we had a crowd around us—dark little bare-legged chaps, and soldiers with rusty old rifles and ragged uniforms. Xibera yelled at them in Spanish. They took their time in coming to help us wheel in the plane. Xibera was very ugly with them.

"What happened to your ship?" said Con, when he saw Xibera's men knew enough groundwork to handle ours.

"I slipped on landing, and broke my arm," said Xibera.

Con asked no more questions; and I took my cue from him. We were out of the United States, without passports and reported to be dead. It was a queer business and the only way to avoid trouble was to watch our controls.

"Here is *el gobernador.*"

I knew that meant Lola's father; and I saw a mob of people coming from the pretty house up on the hill. There were men in uniforms, carrying flags they waved at us, and women, too.

"The señorita wanted me to take my plane and look for you; she kept that fire burning for you all night. Is it possible to fly with only one arm, Señor Capitán?"

"I have known a man to fly with both arms shot through, working his stick with his knees."

I knew Con was telling something out of his own record. He had shown me the citations that had got him his medals, and I had seen those bullet wounds in his arms. I guessed Con did not like Xibera. Xibera did not answer. If he had said Con was lying I would have chipped in. Only, I'm a quiet fellow trying to keep out of trouble.

Then we met the party. First the old general hugged us; then Lola hugged us; and they all yelled *vivos* and waved the flags. Those who could not hug us patted us on the back. Nothing wrong

with that reception. Con went white and red, and all the tired lines melted out of his face, when Lola threw her arms around him. Xibera did not like this, because he turned away and began barking at the peons who were carrying our bags.

They took us over to that house under the great, tall trees, through a garden with a fountain, and along a patio with canaries in cages singing to us. Peons looked out from every door, and the goats followed us, bleating as if they wanted to be in on the celebration, too. It was a real homelike welcome.

Lola ran about singing orders in Spanish that sounded like grand opera. Her hugging meant nothing in my life because it was not in the same grade as what I had under the peach trees in the Imperial Valley.

El gobernador, her father, had white whiskers and big black eyebrows that tangled over his eyes whenever he frowned. He wouldn't let Con and me talk till we had eaten. Con started to tell them all about it, but *el gobernador* said, "Mañana—por la mañana," which, I soon learned, was the password to this country.

They all bowed and said something which meant we could hit the hay as long as we pleased; and we were shown to our room by a fat chap who was a sort of butler. We could hear Lola tuning in more orders, as I shut the door. Con grinned at me.

"What do you think of that, Jim?" he said. "We're in right. She's stopping the mine machinery, so that we can sleep."

The only machinery I'd seen working at the mine was an automatic pump that went by itself. Everything else had gone on strike to look at us. Con and I could have slept with riveters working all round us, we were so tired; but it was nice of her, all the same.

"Me for Mexico," said I. "They're treating us like kings."

"They will, Jim, as long as we're top dog."

We did not wake up till late in the afternoon. I heard a tap on the door, and somebody was saying something.

"That means dinner. *Con mucho gusto,*" said Con as he opened the door to the fat butler they called the major-domo.

There was a bath in that house with good old American fixings. With hats off always to Old Glory I got as great a kick out of that white bath and those nickel faucets as ever I got out of our grand old flag. If ever they go in for electing mechanics to Congress, I'll take the stump on having American machinery saluted, too. Machinery like that don't cause wars, either. Am I right?

That dinner was a banquet to the Americanos. There were more generals from all around the neighborhood, and more women. First time I ever met blond Mexicans; and there was one that was red-headed. They didn't all have black eyes, either. Con told me they were so used to black eyes they preferred green. They were all stunning, with headdresses of black lace and lots of jewelry. Believe me, they're some mechanics the way they work their fans. They make them talk.

The table was covered with silver dishes, spoons as heavy as dumb-bells, with crowns on the handles, and cut-glass decanters so shiny you could see all the girls in them at once. Naturally they all talked Spanish; and when they found Con could get by with it, they all began singing together, like the canaries.

Con told them about our fall into the corn patch, and his sending the radio that we were killed, in order to avoid publicity. *El gobernador* said something about Con being *estrategico.* I thought he was going to make Con a general on the spot. Guess he was right about Con being a wise guy.

I don't know how Con stood all this. There was something of the actor in him, like there is in most star flyers I have seen. I got that when I used to see him land after doing his stunts; taxi up to the hurrahing crowd; look careless, as if coming out of a tail spin ten feet from the field was not a reprieve from execution; and then ask one of the bystanders for a cigarette.

Xibera of course was there, in uniform, with gold tassels on his shoulders, and a sword. He was a general, too. He was as nice and polite as the others. But our fall and flight had put him back in the second place; and if he was the man I figured he was, he would not like it; so I kept my eyes peeled for trouble.

The dinner went on till dark. When the cigarettes came, with the coffee, we had music. First Lola played on the French grand piano; then Xibera sat down to it and began to strum. I thought he was just trying to let his crowd know he was on deck, for all the girls were round Con. But soon he started some high-class fireworks that made me sit up. He got as much music out of his one good hand as very good players can get out of two. His arm in the sling did not move but the other kept hopping all over the keyboard, smashing out great chords and bringing out a pretty singing tune up in the treble all the time. It was great.

"That's some stunt," I said to Lola who had drifted up to me for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "He's a wonderful pianist. That's Godowski's Study for the Left Hand.' Very few can play it."

Then Xibera turned on the radio, which had caught my eye, because it was a make I had handled. Soon we were getting broadcasts from Mexico City. Then he tuned in some American stations. We got most of the California ones, and once he picked up that funny announcer in Florida.

Lola kept running about making everybody happy, seeing they had cigarettes, coffee and cognac. At the same time, she was playing Xibera against Con, it seemed to me. She was the top-notch of all the girls there, with those pearls in her black hair and a dress that was like the sea at low water—all shiny white and pink; her arms and shoulders made the silver look like old lead. *El gobernador* now had all the officers around him; and they were talking about Paris, where these fellows cash in their revolutions. Con's eyes kept drifting between me and Lola and Xibera, who was working the radio.

I tried to get a small inning with her; and I had to hold fast to that girl in the Imperial Valley all the time. No harm in admitting that; a man never knows which is the right girl till he has sampled a lot of others. I really was working for Con. It was hard to believe Lola was flirting fellows her way for political purposes.

"That's a good set," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Señor Xibera made it. He can do anything."

I did not answer, but came right down to earth, for I knew Xibera had lied to her. When Xibera joined the men who were now talking politics I went over to the set and opened the lid of the cabinet. The music was coming through fine, though the static had a funny beat to it. I looked inside and saw I had not been mistaken. It was no home-made set. It was factory made, to the last soldering.

This discovery put the kick of that wine and that cognac right back where it belonged, and left my thinking clear. Xibera might be clever in playing the piano with one hand, but he never wired up that set. He was the man I first figured him out to be: the worst kind of bluffer—the clever man who is half right but wholly wrong.

I was now sobered up from the wine, the girls and the dinner, and was able to

look around, the same as I would figure out a circuit. Con was in an argument, not a hot one, but one of those high-brow affairs where one side keeps saying, "Maybe you're right, señor, but ——" and the other, "I agree with you on that, señor, but——" with both parties getting hot under the collar and working up to a hotter finish. They were talking about Russia or China or some such stuff that don't bother me. I knew Con could hold his own; for all the red wine in *el gobernador's* cellar and all the girls in Mexico could not make him tail spin unless he wanted to; but all the same, the layout looked risky. We were in a foreign country, among high voltages; and at any moment we might have a blow-out, if we got into politics or religion. Con had advised me to keep off these live wires; but then Con could never take his own advice.

To keep out of it all I slipped out on the patio. Over the hills there was a gorgeous moon turning the edges of the hills to silver. I set myself to steady thinking, same as I used to when I was a lineman working among power wires. This whole country looked to me like a badly wired radio, giving good reception for a while, and then needing the trouble doctors. I made up my mind I was not going to be hooked up with anything. Con might join their armies; I would not. Haven't much use for politics, anyway, except to vote Democratic when I remember to register.

Then Lola came out and leaned with me over the rail; as if the moonlight, the scent of the flowers, the canaries trying to keep up with the radio, wasn't enough to step up my voltage, without her tickling my chin with the feathers of her fan.

"I hope you don't mind what Señor Xibera said," she whispered. "You were angry. I saw you go out when he said that. But it is not true. I know; as I have lived in America. Americanos are not money mad."

"I didn't hear anything like that," I said, not surprised that Xibera had made a break like that; for that politeness of his was only weak insulation. "I made up my mind to be angry at nothing, so long as I'm allowed to do my work and get my wages regular."

"Then Señor Xibera was right," she cooed, with her pretty laugh. "Money is all you care for?"

"When I'm on the job—yes," I said sharply, for she had me there.

This girl was no solid-ivory cutie. She had run that dinner without a hitch; she had played Con against Xibera; she had got Con to throw up his job in San Diego. She certainly was an executive.

"I do hope we'll all be friends, Jim," she said, putting her little soft hand on mine and looking up at me.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned," I said, "I promised my girl I would keep out of all scraps."

That was a lie, because Elsa and I did not have time to talk about the trip to Mexico, and at that time I had no suspicion Con was butting into a revolution. But if you can't lie in the face of a pretty woman for the sake of your only girl, you don't deserve to have an only girl. She took it well; just sighed a little, fanned herself instead of me, and took her hand off mine.

"So you're engaged, Jim?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am; we're going to be married when I get back."

"Is Captain Hartigan engaged, too?" she asked, velvetlike and working her fan hard.

Now I should have answered that I knew nothing about Con's private affairs. I would bet any amount Con was engaged more or less ten deep in every city he had flown in. I knew his mail had more pink notes and presents than any man could stand. Being engaged is part of a flyer's groundwork.

But I had learned there was more to Con than what he showed to women,

and even to most men. He had told me all he knew about flying, and what it meant when the game was all risk—everything guesswork, with the war thrown in. He had come through on chances, figuring on split seconds, with his joy stick in a rain of bullets. I had flown with him on no gas and dropped with him safely, where another man would have crashed. Con on the ground was a rowdy matinée idol; but up in the air he was all man. Underneath his Irish froth there was a core of steel I did not want to see burned out; so I thought I would call the bluff of this girl, who was using the moon on her eyes for a spotlight and playing every trick in her repertoire.

"I can't say," I said slowly. "Don't know as I would, if I knew. But since you mention it—what's your game, Lola? You've been long enough in God's country to know when a man's talking straight. Are you trying to string him?"

She got my United States all right, and for a second her eyes sparkled. I was expecting her to dig for a stiletto or something, or call out some of those chaps in uniform. But she did neither; she just hung on the rail like a fighter driven to the ropes.

"I don't—string, as you call it," she whispered.

"Then why did you get him down here? It's none of my business; but I like Con. He's the whitest, straightest, nerviest man in the air—and on the ground, too, when you women leave him alone. If you don't play fair with him you'll start the hottest revolution round here your country has ever seen—and I'll lend him a hand."

She gave a little cry that was like a laugh, and she looked so real human and pretty that she had me oscillating again.

"Oh, Jim dear," she said, throwing her arms round my neck and kissing me. Yes, she did; and me doing nothing to earn it, but just calling her down like a top sergeant. Inside me, I sent an S O S to Elsa and all home ties.

"Say, didn't I tell you I was engaged?" I said.

She let me go and ran along the patio to the door. "I love you because you are his friend," she whispered; and blew out of sight like a little feather.

So I was mistaken; that hug and kiss were just because I stood up for Con; it was her way of telling me she was on the level with him. I was as sure of her now for Con, as I was of Elsa for myself. I felt like scrapping with Con for ever doubting her.

But I decided to say nothing to Con just yet. I was sure she was all right, and I was pretty sure Con wouldn't give her up if she was all wrong. But underneath his good-fellowship Con was as suspicious as a ward politician. He was an airman always listening in for engine trouble. If I was too sure of Lola he might ask for evidence. He mightn't see that kiss and hug the same as I did. I wasn't looking for any scrap with him. My slogan is, "Do your work and keep out of trouble."

When I got back to the room, the men had stopped talking. Con was standing as if he had been arguing with the lot of them. He had his smile on, but his eyes were sparking like the brushes on a commutator. I knew he was holding in his power. The others were pulling at their mustaches; *el gobernador* seemed upset .

"I'm afraid, gentlemen, that on that we'll have to differ," said Con, coming over to me as if he wanted me alongside him. I figured the argument had got to the point of ignition. But nothing happened. They all bowed and said the same nice things about our sleeping well. We were led off by the major-domo.

"What was the trouble, Con?" I said, when we were in our room and the major-domo had gone.

Con did not answer at once, but quietly reopened the door and looked out along the passage. Then he shut the door and tried it. It was of solid oak with great ironwork over it that I could see was hand forged. Con turned the key till it filled the hole in a lock big enough for a penitentiary. Then he pounded the dobe walls and put his ear to them, shut the windows and saw that the sashes were tight, and mysteriously put his finger to his lips.

"I want to be free to say what I think for just half a minute, Jim Crewe," he said sagely.

"Would they listen?" I asked surprised.

"Would they? That's the best thing they do. The country is run that way; it's a whispering gallery with everybody getting something on somebody else. That's their idea of government. And I just want to say that if ever I get that man Xibera across the Rio Grande, I'm going to teach him world politics with every fist and foot I have."

He was boiling.

"What's world politics?" I asked.

"What these fellows have been shooting at me. They're higher up in the air than I've ever flown. They set the world record for dippiness. They talked at me as if I was a backward child. Not only at me, but at all the United States—all we've done, all we're trying for. They gave me more polite jabs, more sass with poisoned trimmings than ever I took without busting things wide open. We're the Shylocks of the world, we're the slaves of machinery, we haven't any art or literature, we've only got money. The only ideas we've got we imported and commercialized. We're out to grab all North America And we don't even know our own business. We're rotten salesmen; for we try to sell Brazil like we do Brooklyn. We're the prize mutts of the world."

"Why did you stand for all this?" I asked.

I got my answer in Con's face. He stood it for Lola.

"Excuse me, Con," I said.

"That's all right, Jim," he said. "I thought of giving the whole outfit the good-by, but I'm going to stick it out and show these fellows something. Then, on the top of all this, I am told by *el gobernador* that his daughter Lola is to be married to that swine, Xibera."

That was certainly some crash for Con. I didn't know what to say; it looked as if his first suspicion was right —that she had only played him down there to train the army. He sat on the side of the bed, looking as if he were licked to a frazzle. If we'd been back home it would have meant a wild night somewhere.

I couldn't stand seeing Con down like that; it didn't seem right. I began to think of what had happened on the patio; if Lola had been stringing him she must have been stringing me, too. I could not believe that kiss, that hug, and the way she acted, was not on the level.

"What are you going to show them, Con?" I asked, feeling my way.

"Flying," he said, bucking up a bit. "Xibera thinks he's an ace. I'm going to show he's a bluffer."

"I know he is in radio," I said, telling him about Xibera bragging of making that set.

"I'll take him for some flights that will land him a white-haired nervous wreck, scared to look at blue sky," he said viciouslike.

I kept prodding him, to dig deeper down to his fighting Irish.

"Take him flying without gas and oil, like we did over that mountain," I said.

"Without an engine or a propeller," he said. "I'll get a glider."

"Spill him out of the plane, parachuting, same as you did me."

"Of course he and all of them will have to learn that."

He was on his toes now, and grinning.

I could see that that army and all its generals were in for a course of intensive training, where casualties did not matter.

"And then, Con," I asked, for I was now blind flying in the rough air of an Irishman's soul in love, "how about Lola?"

Con's jaws shut tight, and he started to undress, as if the talk was over. For me it was only beginning.

"I'm going to forget her," he said.

"Why don't you cut out Xibera?"

There were times when Con could put on more dog than all the hidalgos in Mexico.

"Do you think I'd have a girl who could think for a moment of a man like Xibera?" he said, pulling himself up to West Point attention, his head stiff on his neck.

"How do you know she ever thought of him?" I said. "How do you know she hasn't been driven into it by her father? They don't marry for love down here. They're brought up wrong. Lola has been in our country and could be civilized, if you'd only try. I don't believe she really cares for Xibera."

Then I told him what had happened out on the patio, and how I'd been a brute to Lola to make her show her hand. He certainly looked surprised.

"You've got more nerve than I have, Jim," he said, smiling, as if I'd taught him something.

" 'Tisn't nerve. It was using straight talk. It's the best way with women, same as with everything else. She kissed me for you. I could tell the difference. She's crazy for you, but she's so tied up with her father and these revolutions, she can't express herself. These women down here are not far from going round with their faces veiled, and getting drowned in a sack, if they talk to a strange man. Give her a chance, Con."

Con was trying to see it my way, but his training was just wrong.

"Trouble with you, Con," I said, "you don't know nothing about women, in spite of all your pink notes. They're either white-winged angels or plain vamps, to you. Treat 'em as human beings. Be on the level with them, and you'll win out. That's worth all the poppycock flirtations you've been pulling."

"Hearken to the preacher," said Con, laughing at me.

"Yes, I'm preaching to you not to be yellow and quit her. Save her from Xibera. Get her out of this straitjacket of a life. If you don't cut in on Xibera you're not a man, you're not a flyer, and you're no mechanic."

I couldn't say worse to him; and he stood it like a rookie.

"Where did you get all this about women?" he asked me quietly.

"In those three minutes under the peach trees with the right girl," I said. "I learned more in those hundred and eighty seconds from her than all I ever did from the others. Real love's like parachuting, Con; a second takes you a long way. You go after Lola. You won't be able to work as fast as I did, because your air conditions are different. You don't want to break into politics or religion or mess up what they're starting down here. You just tell her that——"

"I think you can leave that to me, professor," he said quietly, turning out the light.

And I knew he was back again on his feet, on a good take-off, clearing the ground for a record.

CHAPTER IV.

XIBERA SENDS A SECRET MESSAGE.

NEXT morning I was up early, and out before Con. Nobody seemed to be awake but the chickens and the goats. As I slipped quietly along the patio I saw a young peon creep out of the servants' quarters with a basket. His eyes

rolled when he saw me, and he nearly dropped the basket, which was full of eggs. I just patted him on the head and waved him on his way. If he wanted to sneak a few eggs, it was none of my business. Fellows that have to duck away from a boss like Xibera have a right to get even somehow.

I crossed the garden and came out of the door in the dobe wall. A bell was ringing somewhere, same as I heard yesterday. I looked up, but no other plane was in the air, so I wondered what was the celebration now. The bell came from a little church just below the hacienda. I went down to it, but saw no folks going into service, though the bell kept tolling all the time—long, slow strokes in beats of threes. Just as I reached the door, the bell stopped.

The door of the church was a fine piece of stone cutting, but was falling to pieces; and the steps were worn half through. I went into a porch, as a very old white-haired priest came out of the side door in a long-out-of-repair black robe. The door behind him was open, and I could see a rope still jerking with the swinging bell, which he must have been ringing. With him was the boy I had caught stealing the eggs.

The priest bowed to me and waved me into the church. The boy said something to the priest, who reached inside the belfry and took out the basket of eggs. I pretended not to notice. Con had warned me there was religious trouble in this country, so I kept neutral. It was none of my business, if the boy that the priest called Pedrillo stole eggs to give this old man, who got up so early to ring his bell.

No matter how tumble-down that church was on the outside, the inside was taken care of. There were pictures along the walls, statues covered with gold, stained-glass windows, and an altar lit up with candles. Then there was a pulpit of carved mahogany that was the finest cabinetmaking I'd ever seen. The wood was very dark and old and worm-eaten, but whoever handled the tools that cut those flowers and scrolls and flying angels was some mechanic. I began to have hopes for a country that could turn out work like that.

I wanted to slip the old priest something, he looked so down and out in his rags; but I didn't know how to do it. So when he wasn't looking, I dropped half a dollar among the eggs. Then, as we came out of the back door we ran into an ugly-looking soldier carrying a gun. The soldier tried to look pleasant when he saw me, but Pedrillo kept back in the church, and the priest drew himself up like one of those Bible kings in a DeMille picture.

The soldier took one of the eggs and was biting into it, when he spied my half dollar in the basket. He took that, too, and saw it was American. He looked fiercely at me, and put it in his pocket.

I wasn't going to stand for that. No soldier was going to stop me giving something to a nice old man who had been showing me the sights. I emptied the rest of my change into the basket, and when the soldier reached for that, I pushed him aside and handed the collection plate to the priest. The soldier looked like he was ready to use his rusty old rifle; and I stood ready, too. But he decided to have another guess, and walked away.

"You did quite right," said Con, when I told him what had happened. "Lola told me Xibera has tried to stop having that angelus rung, but *el gobernador* allows that much. He's not quite sure which way the political cat is going to jump. Xibera would shoot the priest, if he had his way, and Lola has to slip him those eggs on the sly. Our best bet is to hurrah for both sides and know nothing but flying. Come along; breakfast is ready. And then to work. No *mañana* with us."

We found some of those officers had flown a little, but more on their nerve than their knowledge. Xibera had made the bad landing that crumpled his wing and broke his arm, from not figuring on an eddy caused by the wind curling round the power house. Like the rest, he wanted to start flying at once; but Con refused to let them up, till he was sure they were sound in their ABCs. He took his school into the hangar, called for chalk and a board to draw on, and made them all sit down while he began teaching them aërodynamics. They were pleasant enough about being treated like a junior grade, and were quick to get what he showed them about triangles of forces, lifting pressure, and all that. Xibera, though, had a hundred reasons why he had fallen—all but the right one, which was that he didn't know enough. He said his men wanted quick, intensive training, and not so much theory.

"If you can do it quicker than we did in war time, señor, I've got to be shown," said Con.

Then Con tried them on physical tests for eyesight and balance—all the tricks of twisting on one foot they used in the army. He rolled them in barrels down the hills to see if they were dizzy when they crawled out. He told them he could send for one of those whirling cages that spin the rookie in all directions, while the instructor outside keeps tabs on him with questions. All this was not quite necessary; for I had picked up flying without it. But maybe these flash-in-the-pan fellows needed it. Anyway, Con rode them hard and before the morning was over they were all calling him "general."

Xibera did not make so good at these tests, because he was mad with Con.

"Afraid you don't quite make the grade yet, señor," said Con to him. "Air sense only comes when you can fly without thinking. You don't have to think when you play your piano. You read the music and the fingers do the rest. It's the same with flying. You've got to master your plane as well as you have your keyboard."

Con mastered him with that salve about the piano.

"But I tell you what, fellows," said Con. "You'd make quicker progress if you'd cut down a bit on the strong coffee, the cognac and the cigarettes."

"But you smoke and drink," said Xibera, whose fingers were black with cigarettes, and who drank more than three of them.

"I'm trained," said Con sharply, to let him know they were not in his class.

Round eleven o'clock they all began to get tired. Xibera said something.

"No siesta," said Con. "We're going to put in ten United States working hours. All you get is twenty minutes for lunch."

Then they put up an argument, Xibera in the lead. That fellow wasted ten kilowatts of tongue power trying to get Con to allow them two hours. Con had to give way on this. He always knew how to let them have a point or two. *El gobernador* was right; Con was *estrategico*. Besides, Con saw two peons outside the shed, with gamecocks in cages; there was to be a fight that afternoon between a bird owned by *el gobernador* and another owned by a General Gomez, of some other town. It was a big-league event, and aviation had to lay over till *mañana*.

So we went on, day after day. Con made them learn everything about planes—how to assemble them, to splice, to put on dope. He made Xibera repair his broken wing himself. Then we took up engines, which was easier for them, because they were familiar with running cars.

I soon learned to like the bunch. I said to Con that with a few fellows like us, we could spring a real revolution in this country that would start it on the up grade. We could build machine

shops everywhere, with regular hours and no *mañanas,* get these fellows to like handling steam shovels and working where a slip means sudden death. I saw a fellow the other day shifting dirt by putting it with a hand trowel in a basket and then carrying the basket himself. That's what this country needs—machinery and mechanics. Our country needed only one revolution to start it; something wrong with a country that has to have a back-fire revolution that ends in a blow-out, every year. For, outside working hours, or when there was a cockfight or a bullfight, all their talk was politics—which meant nothing but old revolutions and new ones coming.

The mine went on working, as soon as the peons saw we were all schoolboys sitting round a blackboard. Lola told me the mine had been worked since the days of the Spaniards; but from what "work" means in Spanish, I figured they hadn't shifted as much dirt in that time as one of our railroad gangs would in a year. There was a strike on once, for a few days, and I found in one thing they're ahead of us; when men go on strike in Mexico they get full wages from the boss they're striking against!

Xibera was the only one I never got next to. There was something about him that was off-color, though he tried to be pleasant to me, and let me have his wireless every night to talk to Bud. His shack was in his office, just off the power house. Every night Bud and I tuned in, and I got messages from Elsa, too, who was beginning to learn the code. Her sending, which was slow but accurate, made me see her under the peach trees. Radio has a long way to go before it can broadcast what I got out of that sending; it was something more than electric waves.

Of course I only told Bud we were teaching flying to a few Mexicans. I never let on anything about the hot political talk we used to hear at the hacienda. Bud was always expecting the big story to break. I just tapped back *"mañana."* Elsa seemed to be worrying about me, too, as if she guessed we were sitting pretty close by a volcano. Funny, but women seem to have, in their make-up, wave lengths beyond radio.

Con's first real run-in with Xibera happened the morning of our first practice flights. Con could not put these flights off any longer; they all wanted to be earning their wings.

He had wanted to give them parachute drill first, for we had brought our two guardian angels with us. We had given demonstrations ourselves, Con leaping from the plane while I piloted. But you can't practice with a 'chute till you're up in the air; all you can do is drill them in counting the seconds, before they pull the string. The day for flying had to come at last.

We were up before daylight. We knew we were going to draw a crowd; a matador from Madrid was not in it with us. We were giving our last look over the Xibera two-seater we were going to use, when we heard a yell outside the hangar and Xibera calling some one a pig and a dog. We came out where our plane was on the field and saw Xibera lashing at the bare legs of Pedrillo, who was climbing out of the cockpit. We both liked the boy, who was intelligent and helped us in our groundwork. I had seen Xibera carrying that whip before, shaking it at the peons, who were always searched when they came out of the mine; but I had never seen him lash anybody. Now he was raising big red welts on Pedrillo's calves. Con got to him first and held his arm.

"I don't allow whipping, señor," said Con.

"He's a thief and a traitor. I ought to shoot him. He carries information to our enemies. These hills are full of bandits. My last load of ore was taken

off the burros. He gave the information, I'm sure. He will steal from you; they all steal."

I never saw a man foam at the mouth before, but that was what Xibera was doing, as he tried to get the whip out of Con's hand.

"I don't think he will steal from us," said Con. "He is in my service, and I stand for no whipping, señor."

Con got the whip away from Xibera, but I could see his hand was bleeding. Xibera must have scratched him. Xibera then tried to act like a real general, and keep as cool and calm.

"You must recognize, señor, that your service is subordinate to mine," he said.

"I do. But I have the option of resigning, haven't I?"

By this time the sun was up and the crowd was arriving—a whole army of officers from the hacienda; all invited to the flights with their señoras and señoritas, together with the soldiers who had come with them. A brass band was coming across the bridge trying out their notes, and every peon for miles around had made a fiesta of the day and was there with his family, goats and dogs. The pinks and reds and yellows of their clothes made them look like flower beds. If we quit now, there'd be no show and the flying corps of this army would be disorganized, for none of them had much trust in Xibera, after Con had shown him up. Xibera just took a look at the crowd and walked away.

"What's the matter with your hand?" I said.

"The lash tore it."

"Why didn't you hand him one?" I asked.

"I wasn't sure he hadn't some right on his side," said Con. "Perhaps Pedrillo is a thief. Perhaps he has been a spy for those silver bandits. You can't be sure of anybody down here. Ah, shucks; here's the gang; let's fly."

That first flight was a success. Those fellows had learned something. The take-offs were nice and clean, and the landings didn't jar a nut or crack a strut. Con took each man up, first acting as pilot himself and then letting the other handle the controls. He had made them practice so much in the hangar, sitting with broomsticks between their knees, that they were dead right.

Xibera did not go up; Con let him play the staff officer criticizing from the ground. Nobody wanted to go up with him.

I was getting our big plane ready for a flight when I heard an argument. *El gobernador* wanted to go up, and what was worse, had made up his mind that Xibera was to take him. The wise old bird saw that the Americanos were hogging the show; for every time a plane landed the crowd cheered and the women threw flowers over Con. Lola, of course, was there, looking as if she only needed an eddy to whirl her up, she was so light and feathery and pretty. But she did not want her father to go up; he had never flown before, had taken no training, and he was old.

"Well, if you must," she said, "go up with Captain Hartigan."

Xibera pretended not to hear that, but I knew his smile meant a knife in Con's back, some time, or a shot out of the bushes—or some of the other ways they have of voting against a man down there.

But *el gobernador* had his way; he insisted on going up with Xibera. His army had to be shown they could fly without the Americanos coaching them. So he climbed into the ship with Xibera and the band began to play. They could play well, too, for I never heard a Mexican band play blue notes. The soldiers began shooting in the air, till Xibera stopped them. I remembered that I'd heard Con say they were all shy of ammunition.

Lola was by me when the plane taxied off. She hung on my arm and

I could feel her trembling. All the hands from the mine and the peons from the hacienda looked scared, with the whites of their eyes rolling up into the sky as the plane took off. I could hear them calling on their saints for the old man to come through without a crash.

"Don't worry," I said to Lola. "Xibera's a pretty good flyer, and Con has tightened him up."

Xibera handled his ship all right and did not go very high; he made nice turns at safe angles and a good landing. He was smiling like Julius Cæsar back from the wars, as he helped the old man out of the cockpit. But *el gobernador,* once he felt the earth under his boots let himself go; for he was drunk with his first flight. He had been dreaming of flying for months and afraid to try it, because Lola would not let him. The soldiers began shooting again, and the band playing the "Star Spangled Banner"—even if it did sound like a tango.

"Magnifico!" yelled the old man, hugging Con. "You were right, señor. Everybody must learn to fly. It is liberty—to be up in the air. I see the world under my foot and know we must all be friends. *Vivos los Americanos! Saludo los hermanos Wright! Vivos los Estados Uñidos,* who make these machines!"

Then he hugged me, too. As usual, the Americanos had copped the situation and Xibera, who had done the flying, was put back among the extra men.

But Con did not want any blue notes on his first big day. It was his fiesta all right; but he knew he had to spread the glory a bit, for he had a lot more work to do with these fellows, and they were a touchy bunch.

"Vivos los Mejicanos," he said. "*Vivo* General Xibera. You will make your planes, *gobernador,* and train your own flyers."

The army yelled their *vivos* at this, and even Xibera looked human.

But *el gobernador* had not lit yet. These fellows like working under super pressure. They think they're dead if they're level-headed. The old man had gotten a new kick out of life, something better than cockfights and revolutions. Besides, he had taken a chance with Xibera, he knew, and Lola was hanging onto him as if he had been reprieved from a firing squad.

"But we must all be amigos," he cried. "We must make these machines only for peace, not for war, not to kill each other, not to smuggle arms. For peace—for peace."

He patted the side of the fuselage as if it was a friendly old dog, and he hugged Lola, who reciprocated, crying.

But he had made a break, I could see. Xibera frowned; that fat bulldog-looking chap, General Gomez, cursed under his mustaches, and the soldiers looked ugly.

"Por paz, por paz, no guerra," he kept on saying, patting the plane.

El gobernador's idea of flying putting an end to war was not at all in their program. Then the old priest from the church broke through the crowd and began hugging and blessing *el governador.* Then *el gobernador* said a lot more that I didn't get, but it seemed to tickle the old priest who blessed him some more and went down the hill to his church, while the soldiers looked uglier than ever. That finished the program; the officers went back to the hacienda and the rest of the crowd split off to cockfights, dancing and gambling.

"What did the governor say to the priest?" I asked Con, as soon as I got him alone.

"He was so thankful Xibera had not crashed him that he told the priest to burn some candles for him to Santa María del Guadelupe, and that he could ring his bell as often as he wanted to."

"What did he mean by using the planes for smuggling arms?" I then asked Con.

"There's some idea of meeting those cattle boats off the coast and taking on arms and ammunition."

We were overlooking the planes before wheeling them into the hangar, and I knew enough of Con by this time to guess he was holding back something. I was not going to let him play the politician with me.

"You're not going to stand for that, are you?" I asked.

"It's nothing to me what they do with their planes," he said, rather shortly.

"Did you know this was the big idea when we started?" I said. He was not going to high-hat me. We were partners in this game and I wanted to be on the inside.

"Jim," said he, "if I was to tell you all the crazy schemes these fellows dope up every minute I'd be dizzy. You saw how the governor went off half cocked —well, they're all like that. They never look at the practical side of anything. We ask will anything work before we try it. They say, *"Magnifico!"* and let it go at that. Don't pay any attention to them."

"Con," I said, for I knew he was pulling wool over my eyes, "there's a revolution sizzling down here, and you can count me out. I take part in no gun running. I won't be swung into their rows."

"Nor will I, Jim."

"I don't trust you, Con," I said, "—at least, not on the ground. Up in the air you're level-headed enough, but on the ground you're worse than any Mexican. And when there's a girl in it you——"

"Cut that, Jim," said Con snappily.

Then I saw Xibera come out of his office and look our way. Some soldiers, who had squatted down to monte, began to take notice of the way Con had barked at me.

"Steady, Con," I said. "We mustn't scrap under their searchlights."

Con picked up a piece of waste and began scrubbing at the bottom of the fuselage of the bus Xibera had flown in. He looked under his arm at Xibera; then he went over to him.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me your oil can was leaking?" he bawled, as if Xibera was still in the school. "A flyer is supposed to look over his plane after she lands and note and remedy all defects. Can't I ever teach you anything?"

Xibera took this bawling-out first with a frown and then with his sour grin. Most likely he figured those Americanos could not be framing anything; they never get excited except over their machines—as Con meant him to figure. He apologized for his neglect. Con excused him, and said he would do the work himself. Then he returned to my side.

"I wasn't saying anything against Lola," I said to Con. "But I don't want to see you dragged into their mussy scraps."

"I've got to stand by her, haven't I?" he said.

"How far will you go?"

"The limit, Jim," he said. "She's worth it, isn't she?"

I couldn't deny that. I was continually thanking the United States and a girl in the Imperial Valley that Lola didn't have a twin sister.

"Well, Con," I said, "if it's just for her, I'll stick, of course."

"I knew you would, Jim," he said, giving me his hand. I passed him my pocket wrench, instead.

" 'Twon't do for us to be seen shaking hands," I said, "or they'll know for sure we've been scrapping."

Xibera and the soldiers disappeared, so Con and I were able to talk freely.

"You're quite wrong," he said, "if you think it was Lola who first led me into this job. It was really your old boss, Commodore Hastings."

"Why, I thought he hated your soul, Con," I said.

"That was his smoke screen. Like most chaps that live along the border, he is strong for intervention. He once had yellow fever down here, and he thinks the whole trouble with Mexico is germs. He wants to start trouble enough so we can send down a man like General Gorgas and clean up what's the matter with them. That's why he smuggles arms and ammunition on his yacht."

To me, this was a revelation.

"It was not liquor, then?" I said.

"Liquor he brought back," said Con, "paying for it with guns and cartridges, in the hope that some of these generals would make a raid over our border some time."

I got hot under the collar at this.

"And you wanted to help that?" I said.

"Jim," he answered with that miles-in-the-air way of his that got the girls, made him an ace, lifted him out of my class and drove him crazier than all the Mexicans he'd just been panning, "there are times when I want to land the good old U. S. one in the slats just to wake her up. We're behind the world in commercial aviation. Not in private flying, but in getting support from those fellows in Washington and from the public."

"You'd drive your country into a war to help flying?" I said.

"It would only be a little war. We'd soon win out. But nothing but hostile planes flying over their heads will make our politicians think. War made radio, but it did not do enough for flying, because America has never been bombed from the air. London and Paris were, and what's the result? They run passenger traffic every day on a regular schedule."

"Con," said I, "I'm sorry I shook hands with you just now—even at one end of a wrench. I'm through with you for keeps."

"I said I'd changed my mind, didn't I?" he answered.

"You'll spiral into some nuttier proposition *mañana*," I said.

"Nothing with a war in it, Jim," he said seriously. "I was wrong on that because Lola has told me enough, and my own eyes have told me that war with this country might not be just a little ruction over the border. This country is the dump for every crank in Europe. The war might be a bigger one than the last. See that cut?"

He showed me the plaster he had stuck over his fingers that were torn in taking the whip from Xibera.

"That lash had wire in the knots, Jim. That whip was made in Russia. It was a knout. Xibera has been there to one of their conventions. They don't use knouts there now, but he must have thought they'd help out here. Jim, there are pipe lines of poison gas all the way from this country to Moscow. That's why I changed my mind. I'm just as strong now as you are for keeping out of their revolutions."

"But a minute ago you said you'd go the limit."

"To help Lola and her grand old dad out of them, too."

Xibera came out of his office again and walked with us over to the hacienda; so of course we could not talk any more. Asking Xibera for a light from his cigarette, I took a close-up of him. His eyes were different from any Mexican's, when you looked close. They were almost Chinese when he shut them tight. He was different, the more you took stock of him. At times he was as clumsy as a hunkey; but he could dance like a lounge lizard. He could be as thick as a squarehead in getting your meaning sometimes; but he could beat Con at chess. He could talk like a wabbly, but use a wire whip for his peons. He could make that piano whisper like a girl saying, "Yes;" but the same fingers could bend nails I had to take pliers to. Never met such a man, and don't care if I never do again.

Maybe he was a Russian under a Mexican alias.

Before dinner I dashed off a ten-page letter, telling Elsa all about our flights. I could tell things in a letter I couldn't over the radio. By this time she was as strong for Con as most women were, and was always asking me not to let him kill himself.

That night after dinner the trouble broke, and we were in it up to our necks. Xibera had disappeared, though I didn't miss him at first. Con, as usual, was dividing his time between the officers and Lola. He was getting acquainted with that new officer, General Gomez, and the staff he had brought with him.

As I went to the radio, Lola called to me that Xibera said it was out of commission, and that he didn't like anybody to touch his set.

I said I thought I could fix it. Then I turned the switch, opened the cabinet, and saw that the tubes were not burning. I felt the detector tube. It was not down in the socket; so of course it couldn't burn. The other tubes were loose, too. The set was out of commission, but Xibera had put it out. I put the tubes in tight, and soon we were getting Mexico City.

But the radio weather went bad suddenly, and the music did not rise above the static level. The static had the same old regular beat I had noticed before and some of it, I knew, came not from the ether conditions but from interference close by, from the generator of the light plant. I knew the brushes in that generator were old and sparked terribly.

While *el gobernador* was spouting poetry about his first flight, and Lola was saying she was going to fly to-morrow, I disconnected the loud speaker and slipped on the phones, so that I could listen better. Seemed as if the whole world was trying to talk to me, the bird squeaks and heterodyne howls were like trying to get DX in New York, before the locals sign off. Then, on the low wave lengths, I got a burst of code, in Spanish. I recognized the fist; it was Xibera's.

I had first heard it in Bud's shack; it was the lid-sending of a badly trained amateur. I never forget a sender's fist, especially when it's as bad as that. That code was coming in as interference from his shack, riding over the interference of the generator. I managed to read enough of it to know that Xibera was sending to Mexico City, and that he was talking about Con and me. I caught one word that made me jump. It was *"muerte,"* and I knew that meant "death."

I called Con over and whispered to him what I could, while he slipped on one of the phones. Of course the others strolled over to the radio, too, out of curiosity. I told them Con was getting Boston, his home city. Con smiled up at Lola and her father and backed me up, saying it was very faint.

I knew some of the things Con had done in the war; I had seen some of the stunts he pulled in peace, but nothing ever deserved a medal more than Con's smiles to the ladies, while he was listening to that murderous message of Xibera's.

He took off the phones, hooked up the loud speaker, and tuned into some opera in Mexico City, saying the static was too bad to hear Boston.

When they all sat back to listen, he maneuvered me outside, his fingers digging into my arm till it hurt.

"Jim," he whispered, when we were far out in the garden, "that swine, Xibera, is double-crossing the old *gobernador,* and asking for orders to arrest him. Xibera is a spy of the central government. He wants to proclaim martial law, which would mean a quick sentence for *el gobernador* and *muerte* from a firing squad."

The whisper came from Con's throat as if he had a rope around his neck.

"And Lola?" I asked, feeling just as bad.

"I didn't get her name. But she'll be in it if they try to shoot her father; she's a scrapper."

I never had a meaner minute than this one—out there in that garden listening to the canaries, the opera, the ladies' voices inside, knowing that murder and sudden death were in the air all round us, and not knowing what to do.

"Maybe we could get them off in our ship," said Con.

"Perhaps *el gobernador* can line up enough of his people to fight?"

"Don't you know these people yet, Jim?" said Con savagely. "You can't line them up to stick one minute. All they care is who gets first on the band wagon. Lola and her father have a sure-fire army of just two—you and me. Who are those soldiers and officers who have been drifting in for days? They are all in with Xibera, even while they're drinking the governor's wine."

We came out of the garden into the open, so that we could speak freely.

"See, Jim—our ship is guarded," said Con. "I'll bet you *el gobernador's* flying put them up to the idea that he might slip off that way."

In the lights from the power house across the valley, we could see men with rifles standing round our big bus, which we had left outside the hangar.

"We could rush that bunch," I said. "You have your automatic, and *el gobernador* has arms. Lola can shoot, too, can't she?"

"I'll say she can," he said. "But he seemed rather slow in getting my idea.

"Then tell *el gobernador* all we know, before Xibera makes a strike. Muster his peons and get him away in our bus."

"Jim," he said, with what would have been a grin, only he looked too worried, "when it comes to a show-down, you're a worse hot-head than I am. We can't interfere—at least that way. They would shoot us up, and neither our relatives nor our government would have a right to kick. We'd only be two dead Americanos who had been playing with the *insurgentes*."

"Are you going to let Xibera shoot your girl's father, and perhaps your girl?" I said, disgusted with him for not taking a fighting chance.

He didn't answer.

"How far has this gone? Did Xibera get full orders to go ahead? When is he going to show his hand?"

"I don't know, Jim, but it must be soon. He was sending a long spiel about doing everything legally. That was where we came in. He told the man at the other end of the wave train—the minister of war, I think—that he had two American army men down here as witnesses. He wants us to prove that everything he does is in law and order. We're to give him a coat of whitewash. I couldn't get it all, the static was so bad."

"Well, he's going to get some more," said I, trotting down the hill.

Con came after me at a jump.

"Don't be a fool. You can't fight an army, Jim."

"I can fight Xibera, and without getting killed either."

"What are you going to do? Give me your gun," he said.

"Haven't got it on me," I answered.

"What are you going to fight him with?"

"With interference," I said. "You go into the house and round up the old man and Lola and all the friends he has."

Con did not follow me, and I slackened up my speed a little, as I came to that bridge, which was of white stone, making me a good mark in the bright starlight. It's a sign you've robbed or murdered somebody, if you get a gait on in this country; and I expected a shot every minute. But maybe they recognized who it was; only Americanos are allowed to walk more than half a mile

an hour without being suspected of overthrowing the government. I passed the soldiers by their fires and came to the shack. I had figured out my attack. It was my usual time for sending to Elsa, so I burst in through the shack door as usual. Of course I pulled my best apologies, when I saw Xibera sitting there in his best uniform, with his automatic strapped on—as if I was surprised. Con would have done it better, as I'm a bad actor.

"Oh, the Miss Elsa hour," said Xibera. "I'm sorry, but the reception is very bad to-night, and I have been delayed in getting my official business through. Do you mind waiting, señor?"

One of my plans had been to put his station out of commission—blow out his tubes or something, the same as he had loosened the tubes in the receiving set. He must have suspected that Con or I might have caught his Mexico City stuff in the house, and that was why he had crippled that receiver. But now I saw there was no chance of his leaving the shack for some time, I had to think up something different. The main thing was I knew Xibera was waiting for orders; it was up to me to cut his communications.

I went out and into the power house and talked to the second engineer, a Mexican. I could not stop Xibera sending, but I might ball up his reception. So when the engineer was not looking, I picked up a handful of dirt from the floor and threw it into the commutator. It sparked at once more than ever, and the engineer heard the fireworks. But he was lounging on some boxes, lighting a cigarette. He just shrugged his shoulders; far be it from him to do anything to those brushes till mañana. The sparks went on sputtering and I knew that that handful of grit was shooting all sorts of trouble into Xibera's phones, and that he was not likely to get much good reception to-night.

Then I sprinted down the field and across the bridge, till I came to the door in the wall of the hacienda. Con was standing in the shadow.

"The revolution has back-fired," he said. "*El gobernador* is under arrest, and Xibera is to supersede him. There is to be a court-martial in an hour."

CHAPTER V.

THE VERDICT FROM THE AIR.

IT was the first time I had ever seen Con down. He drew me away from that door; for inside we could see soldiers watching us. We walked away just as if we were taking a stroll.

"Just after I got back," Con said, "rifles were poked in every window and doorway, and General Gomez with a revolver in his hand, followed by a lot of soldiers, came into the room calling on the governor to surrender. The poor old chap couldn't do anything else. He and his few friends were outnumbered ten to one."

"What did Lola do?"

"Acted like a thoroughbred. Didn't holler, but just tried to stand between her father and the bullets."

"They didn't shoot?" I asked.

"No. But for me being there, I believe they would have. Gomez pointed out to the governor that resistance was useless, and asked Lola for her keys, saying there was no charge against her. He kept saying, more to me than to the governor, that he would have a fair trial. Every move was a play to the United States, through me. One of his men broke in a desk with a rifle, and Gomez put him under arrest. But I believe but for you and me being here, the old man would have been full of lead by this time."

"What are we going to do?" I said.

"What can we do? They have the goods on the governor. Gomez showed me the papers, and I know without seeing them. *El gobernador* has certainly been conspiring to overthrow his gov-

ernment. But so was that hound, Xibera; so was Gomez; so were all of them. But Xibera went right about face in time to save his own skin and swing the crowd his way. They will give the governor some sort of court-martial and shoot him when the farce is over. We're invited to show, to satisfy public opinion north of the Rio Grande."

Somehow we found ourselves on the field near the power house. Soldiers were still hanging about, playing cards by the fires, sleeping, smoking. One of them had a guitar and was singing a love song. There was no sound from the hacienda. Con told me that the house peons had started to yell and cry to their saints, and the old major-domo went down on his knees; but the soldiers had silenced them with kicks and rifle butts in the ribs. It was a fine night for a murder, and so quiet you'd think the murders were all done.

I told Con what I had done to the commutator as we heard the clicking of Xibera's key.

"Don't know if it amounts to much," I said, "but it was all I could think of."

"I wish I could think of as much, Jim. It may jam him a little. Gomez said Xibera received his appointment as the new governor with orders to suppress this revolution over the radio. Probably the government is just as anxious to have everything pulled off legally as he is. We may gain time."

"For what?" I asked impatiently, for I was dancing on my toes to do something.

"I don't know; but time's something, isn't it?"

It was about seven hours to daybreak, which would be the end of time for Lola's father, and perhaps for more of us; for Con told me that even Gomez and Xibera did not feel at all safe. There might be bloody fighting yet. The whole State had been working for the governor; the peons liked him, for he was fair and gave them lots of bull-fights; the bandits and Indians in the hills would prefer him to Xibera, for he allowed rake-offs from the silver of the mines. Xibera would have to railroad the old man to the firing squad quickly; then distribute a lot of pesos to turn these shifty folk his way. At present neither side could depend on them. The only way to win an election down there is to kill your opponent; then, if the other side want their votes to count, they climb on your wagon.

We had reached the door of the shack when Xibera came out. The soldiers squatting in the doorway sprang to their feet and saluted the new governor.

"Señor Gobernador," said Con, giving him his new rating as polite as if he was in the White House, "I understand from General Gomez that you wish us to be present at the trial of General Savilla for treason."

"As disinterested observers, gentlemen," smiled Xibera. "After the trial and execution you may have access to my sending station here to report the proceedings to your newspapers."

"You appear to take his condemnation for granted, señor," said Con. "That is hardly judicial."

Con scored there.

"Naturally, since I have all the evidence in my possession. General Savilla will have a fair trial. An officer will be appointed as his advocate. Everything will be done according to law. We are not barbarians."

"Except that you are not giving the general time to prepare his defense. Besides, since you're using myself and my friend to justify yourself to the world, permit me to say you will have to show us your authority for this arrest and for holding this court. No offense, *Señor Gobernador,* but the world will demand that."

None knew better than I that Con Hartigan was boiling all the way from his feet to his fists, but his fighting Irish

did not get into his voice. He spoke like a lawyer—not a criminal lawyer but one of those cool chaps who argue cases in high courts. My hat was off to him. Xibera stood still and thought a moment.

"I have just received my appointment and full authority to proceed as I think fit," he said.

"May I be permitted to see the papers?" said Con.

"There are no papers. I received my power to act over the wireless direct from Mexico City. From *el presidente* himself."

His hand went to his hat, when he mentioned his president, and he spoke loudly, so that the soldiers standing by could catch that much of his English. Con only got cooler.

"I don't doubt you, *Señor Gobernador,*" he said. "But the world will say we have only your word. Nobody here is capable of reading code but you and us, and we have not heard your orders. You have not produced anything civilized law will call evidence."

Xibera began to get restless, as Con went on driving home his point.

"The world will say you usurped this power. You have no written order to show your authority. If you kill General Savilla on an alleged radio message, the world will say you are black murderers masquerading as white men. Your name will be execrated. More than that: if, by any chance, you yourself should come to be elected president, I can certainly swear that my government will never recognize you."

Con let himself get a bit hot in his manner, as he pulled this; and it certainly hit Xibera hard, for all these revolutions and counter revolutions are primaries heading for the presidential palace in Mexico City.

Xibera was so mad that I thought we were gone sure. Con did not seem to mind what he had said; nor did he pay any attention to those soldiers picking up their guns at hearing him barking at their boss. Con went on saying more, and in Spanish, so that they could understand some of it. I caught *"los Estados Uñidos,"* something about old Huerta.

The soldiers began cheering.

"Vivo Gobernador Xibera! Vivo Presidente Xibera! Vivos los Americanos!"

The soldiers seemed to think Con was electioneering for Xibera, who tried to hush them. He was really frightened, for he wasn't ready to show all his hand yet; I could get that. There were a lot of other generals who might not like him getting the nomination ahead of them. Finally Xibera stopped their cheering, which might have started another revolution from Gomez's soldiers in the hacienda. He turned to us with his grin not quite so cocksure, and bowed to Con.

"I thank you, señor," he said. "You are right. There is a slight flaw in our proceedings, from a technical point of view. It can easily be remedied, however. We will hold the court-martial at once in the power house, within touch of the wireless. You and your friend can hear my direct orders from my government. I think that will suffice. It will at least be audible evidence."

He then went back into his shack, and I could hear him tapping at the key.

"Doesn't miss a trick, does he?" whispered Con to me.

"Neither did you, Con. The way you swung that delegation, it's a pity you're not a Mexican; you'd get the presidency on one ballot. How about trying that speech on some of the other generals? Seems there's nothing to do now but play politics."

"No time, no time," he said.

We went into the power house, which opened into Xibera's shack at the back. We could hear him sending, but could not read the code by sound on account

of the gasps from the exhausts. That commutator was still spitting pretty badly; it would soon need new brushes. That handful of dirt was working!

All the same, that poorly kept plant did me good to look at, for it was pasted all over with home names. The engine came from Pittsburgh and the generator from the General Electric.

Soon we heard voices outside giving orders. And a squad of marching soldiers with old General Savilla in the middle, Gomez and all his officers, came into the power house. Then Xibera came in from the shack, put a chair by the door, sat down, and the court-martial was on.

Old Savilla bore himself well. He bowed to us. They had allowed him to get into his best uniform, and gave him a chair, too. The doorway was filled with soldiers and the walls were lined with them. They all had new guns, for they had found boxes of them and fresh ammunition in the cellars of the hacienda. They were pawing the bright, new, blue barrels and trying the clips. It wouldn't take much to start them all firing, I figured. But General Savilla didn't move a muscle at these clicks all around him.

Xibera began talking in Spanish, and I knew enough by this time to understand that he was laying before them something of what Con had said. Then he spoke to us in English.

"I intend to have this court in direct communication with the minister of justice in Mexico City, but we will have to be patient, for the reception conditions are not good."

Con looked at me, and I spoke up.

"Maybe I can help you, *Señor Gobernador,*" I said, starting toward the door of the shack.

"I'm afraid I can't let any one touch the wireless just now," he said, waving his hand till a soldier stepped between me and the door. "It worked well up to a little while ago. There are probably thunderclouds to the south. We will have to wait till they clear."

"I don't want to touch your wireless," I said, "and I don't think it's static that's troubling you. Your generators here are sparking and that's spoiling your reception. Better let me change the brushes, if you have new ones; or, better still, stop the generator."

He wouldn't believe me at first, though if he was the radio shark he pretended to be, he should have guessed at that interference long ago. I told him to put the phones on his ears. He reached in for them and did so, but only on one ear, so that he could keep the other to listen to us. With a stick I then belted one of the commutators, till the blue flash lit the power house and all the lights blinked. Xibera jumped as if he was shot through the head, at the racket I turned into his eardrums.

"That's your thundercloud, mister," I said, not caring a whoop for his title and gold tassels, as I was on my own ground now, handling something I had more respect for—a G. E. generator.

But I didn't know I was going to make such a hit. Xibera wanted me to do it again, and the other generals wanted to hear it, too. They all tried out the phones, and I had to spark the commutator again. They had all got used to radio, but this was something new; they called it *"una maravilla."*

"Yes," I said, "a miracle made in *los Estados Unidos."*

My stock had gone up, and I did what I could to plug Con's game, if he had any. I couldn't wave the Stars and Stripes and tell them to behave like humans, so I just waved that generator. Let them Red propagandists say what they like about machinery making slaves out of men; I say get men interested in machinery and they're better men. We were all friendly together. Even poor old General Savilla, counting the minutes to his death, was interested. For one minute that gang of murderers

were just as human as a bunch of radio fans wiring up a new circuit.

But as soon as Xibera found out what was wrong, he threw in his monkey wrench by bringing them to attention and calling the court to order.

"Stop the generator, señor," he said to me. "We'll get some lanterns and proceed."

I was just going to pull the switch to the power when Con spoke.

"Hadn't we better warn the ladies at the hacienda first?" he said.

Con was thinking of Lola, who was under guard at the hacienda, where she would be plunged into darkness if I pulled that switch.

Xibera gave an order and a man hurried out—as much as these fellows can hurry, except to a fight or a fiesta.

"They can burn their candles usefully this time," said Xibera.

I then knew that those candles General Savilla had ordered the priest to burn were more nails in his coffin.

It was some time before the man came back with the lanterns. These were lit and hung around the power house before I stopped the generator and cut out the electric light. Everything was still now; the engines had stopped. I saw Con cock his ear toward the inside of the shack.

"I think you're getting Mexico City now, *Señor Gobernador,*" he said. Con could hear the crackling of the code in the phones that were lying on the table.

"The court will come to attention," said Xibera, and all the officers stood up stiffly, looking their ugliest once more, trying to listen to that code and pretend they could read it. But it was not loud, and you couldn't hear it at all when Xibera put the phones over his ears.

Now I had no idea of how things were going to work out. I looked at Con; he was standing at attention, too. He had his ten-thousand-feet-up-in-the-air face on, with his eyebrows wrinkled, seeing everything, hearing every little and big sound, ready for every change, every drift, reading every man's face. I could see his hand moving a little, as if he was feeling for his stick or the trigger of a machine gun. He was as steady as a rock, but I knew his brain was buzzing ten thousand revolutions a minute, wondering what he could do to save that white-haired old general from being railroaded to death by this burlesque court of justice. Con had said, "Give me time," so I went on stalling for all the time I could make.

"Señor Gobernador," I said to Xibera, "wouldn't it be better if I wired in an amplifier, so that all the court could hear that code over your loud speaker?"

Xibera gave me a suspicious look. He did not want me meddling with his sets; perhaps he half guessed I had something to do with that homemade interference.

"I can hook in the amplification unit of your receiving set, and bring it in good and loud."

The court was impatient to know what I was saying, and Con told them. They liked my idea, and Xibera had to agree, for he was afraid to go against them too much. They wanted to be in on everything, as far as they could, and if he kept anything from them, he might be the prisoner for the next court-martial. He was playing high-voltage politics, so he had to allow me into the shack.

His outfit consisted of a short-wave receiver, his sender, and a broadcast receiver with two stages of amplification. I took my own good time in that wiring. But I couldn't stall too much, and when the job was finished, the code came shooting from the loud speaker like rifle fire in volleys. It scared the soldiers a little and I saw them grabbing their rifles and looking out toward the hills. But that code did not come from Mexico City, for the dials had shifted while I was working and I had

accidentally tuned in a destroyer off Panama. It was only operator gossip, but it sounded good to me; and I wanted to get my mitt on that key and shake hands with that operator. It bucked Con up, too, and I was hoping it would give him some sort of idea to save the general. Con could get more ideas out of nothing than any man I ever met.

"You hear, señor?" I said to Xibera, who could read the code. "They aren't so far off, are they?"

He looked as if somebody had trod on him, waved me out of the shack and tuned into the station he wanted.

"This is the office of the minister of justice," he said, when the code came in. He was not good at receiving, either, and he kept asking for repeats over and over again.

"I am now informing the department," he told the court, "that the two American army officers are present at the court-martial of General Savilla. In view of the propaganda conducted by our enemies in the United States, I am asking the minister that they be permitted to report the proceedings of the court to the newspapers of their country through this wireless station. I am also asking the minister to repeat his orders to me that I am to take over the State and administer summary justice."

Then I interrupted him; I had another idea which would give Con more time.

"Pardon, *Señor Gobernador,*" I said. "What good will it do for the court to hear what they can't read? They don't know code. Why not get your senders in Mexico City to broadcast their orders on the carrier wave of one of your stations? They will get those orders in words, then. You shoot politics into the air sometimes, don't you? I knew I had him there."

Con caught the idea in a flash, and began spreading it in Spanish to the court. But Xibera did not like this at all. He wanted all the dope to be under his own hat.

"The minister would never do it," he answered. "This is a serious situation, and our enemies could listen in. The news might create other insurrections in disaffected States. We cannot use a broadcasting station for official communications."

"Why not put it up to the minister?" said Con, sparring for time.

This started an argument in the court; some wanted my idea, some did not.

"It's the only way," I said to Xibera. "Let them hear your boss tell you to go ahead. Let everybody hear. You'll never have a civilized country till you do nothing that cannot be broadcast. That's the only way to prove you're on the level."

Xibera was already hopping mad, because the court was getting out of hand, and now he turned on me.

"You dare to imply that I am acting on usurped authority?" he said. I wasn't slick like Con; I just looked what I thought of him.

"I see nothing to dare," I said, for I could feel that destroyer just around the corner, and I could see that Xibera wasn't as sure of this crowd as he'd like to be. "Get this, *Señor Gobernador.* There's nothing I don't say when I've a mind to. I think you're only staging a frame-up."

"Hold on a bit, Jim," said Con.

"Ain't going to hold a damn word," I said. "We've been holding in too long. They think we're scared of them. There's a United States squadron just a few miles off, with bombing planes that can get here in a few hours——"

I reached for the sending key. Xibera sprang to his feet and drew his automatic; the soldiers leveled their rifles, and I'd have been a casualty sure, but that Con shoved me back into the shack yelling at me not to be a fool and then apologizing for me to the court.

"You have made a mistake," he said to Xibera, shifting the blame to him. "You have insulted an American citizen. You have given him a dare. It would be as bad, *Señor Gobernador,* as if I were to pull your nose."

Con reached out with his fingers toward the big beak of Xibera. He didn't touch him, of course; but Xibera started backward, giving Con the laugh he wanted.

He told me afterward that his plea to the jury on my behalf was that Americans are brought up to accept every dare, and that Xibera, through ignorance of the laws and constitution of the United States, had insulted one of its citizens on a point of honor, that Señor Crewe would not be allowed to return home, if he had not resented that remark. They all began bowing to me and begging me to go on. Xibera said he had no intention of insulting the representative of a great and proud nation and asked the assistance of my scientific knowledge for the furtherance of justice. So I started off again. We had gained nearly an hour and it was getting on to daylight.

"Señor Gobernador," I said, "get your people to broadcast their orders on the same short wave as you use for code. Nobody but the local fans will get that, and you haven't got many fans down here. You won't start any scare, and this court will be able to hear your actual orders in words, and you'll be O. K."

Con shot what I said in Spanish to the court; they all shouted, *"Si, si;"* and Xibera had to agree. He tapped off his message for this and then we had a bad wait. I did not like the looks of the court. The soldiers were impatient. They began their hot arguments again. That ugly Gomez wanted them to go ahead on their own. They were like a crowd I had seen at a bullfight, when something was wrong with the bull.

Then General Savilla, who had been just sitting stiff and proud, got up and asked to be allowed to address the court. Xibera waved his hand and gave him permission.

"I want to inform these Americanos," said the general in English, "that I am the victim of foul treachery. This man whom I admitted into my family, with whom I contemplated an alliance, has betrayed the most sacred rights of hospitality."

He pointed his finger at Xibera as if it was a gun. Xibera yelled, *"Muerte,"* and drew his automatic. Rifles were raised all round, and it looked as if the general was going to be clubbed; but Con and I were just in time to save him. With me in front and Con behind, no one could shoot, stab or hammer, without hitting us. Their yelling was awful, but Con's was the loudest.

"Is this a court or a butcher's shop?" he yelled.

"He has insulted the court," bawled Xibera, trying to get a pot shot at the old man.

"It's not a court yet," came back Con. "You have not received your full authority. And even if it was, a man who is condemned to death can say what he likes to any court. He can with us. You shall not murder him without due trial."

When it came to swinging a crowd Con had it all over Xibera.

"I tell you it's not a court yet," he went on. "Besides, you promised him an advocate. Where is this advocate? Who defends the prisoner? If you don't appoint one it means you are about to murder this man without a show of reason, justice or humanity; and tomorrow the whole world will know it."

This quieted them a bit. They lowered their rifles; and Xibera put his gun in his pouch and called the court to order.

"I appoint Capitán Perez advocate for the prisoner," pointing to the youngest and scrubbiest-looking of the officers.

Perez shook his head and backed out. Others did the same; none of them wanted to say a word for the man they had condemned before they came into court.

"How about me being his advocate?" said Con.

"No—impossible!" said Xibera.

The others said the same, but Con talked against them.

"Why not?" he said. "It's your best play. Won't it help you for the world to know that the prisoner had legal help from the United States? Here's your chance to whitewash yourselves. You know it won't change your verdict. You've got this man marked for death. This court is only a camouflage. It's time for honest speaking. You can't stop me with anything but bullets, and you're too scared of my country to do that. Let me do what I can for this man, for the honor of your country, if you want to leave her a rag of it. Get authority for me to act from Mexico City. I'll bet you they're wiser *politicos* than you are; they will grant the request. If your laws are against it, appoint your own advocate and allow me to instruct him——"

Con was doing his best to drag out the time, when suddenly the horn just behind Xibera began to send out a carrier wave. Con stopped; everybody listened with him, when a harsh, heavy voice began speaking out of it in Spanish.

"El presidente," said Xibera, springing to his feet and touching his cap. The court did the same, and even the prisoner rose to his feet, as that voice came in with loud, clear reception. I looked at Con; he was white. I heard the word *"muerte"* come out of the loud speaker several times, and the court began repeating it. General Savilla sank back in his chair.

"The department of justice," said Xibera, "has taken over the case and tried the prisoner in Mexico City. He is condemned to death. The sentence will be carried out at daybreak. Remove the prisoner."

The soldiers led away the old general, and the court was dismissed.

"I trust, gentlemen," said Xibera to us, "that you can now satisfy your country that we have complied with all forms. And I trust that now that this incident is over, you will continue to give the State the benefit of your invaluable instruction."

"We tender our resignations," said Con, "and will return home to-morrow."

Xibera bowed; then turned to me.

"If you wish to communicate with your friends, Señor Crewe," he said, "my wireless now is entirely at your service."

I bowed, too; what else could I do? We were licked, that was plain. In a couple of hours the general would be shot. The only way to get out of this ugly business was to do things their way. They were top dogs.

"I really am indebted to you, Señor Crewe," went on Xibera. "Your skill has enabled me to shift the responsibility for the execution of General Savilla entirely onto the government. I thank you for your lesson in what you call 'passing the buck.'

He crowed like a champion rooster with his feathers flying and all his spurs blooded. But he had to turn at the door for another shot at us.

"You will not be present at the execution, señores?"

"I do not wish to witness the execution of General Savilla," said Con snappily, as if his mouth was a .32 at target practice.

"I understand," smiled Xibera, getting Con's meaning that Con would be very glad to see the execution of the new *gobernador*. "But I promise you that Señor Savilla will have all the comforts of his religion, as well as the satisfaction of having had a fair trial. His accomplice, Padre Moreno, whom you

will observe I have not indicted, will be with him to the last. The padre will also be allowed to toll his bell after the execution. *Buenos noches, señores.*"

CHAPTER VI.

UNA MARAVILLA.

IT seemed to me that we were absolutely licked. Con had no more to say and could do nothing. He just stood in the door of the power house looking up in the sky for the day to come—the last day of General Savilla. He looked very tired.

"We'd better hop off at once, Jim," he said. "Get the old bus ready, while I go to the house for our duds."

I knew he wanted to try and get a word with Lola. It did make me feel bad to see a man like Con Hartigan creeping off like a whipped cur.

The soldiers were willing enough to help me get the bus in shape and carry her oil and gas. I had started the generator again so that we could have light enough. I kept watching those stars. I knew that the moment they went pale a parade would come out of the hacienda gate. I knew Con was right. According to their laws the general did deserve death. In war time we would have done just the same, and this country was at war with itself. But every one of those men who tried him were, up to yesterday, on his side; the whole gang deserved shooting, if he did. He was the whitest man of the bunch. He did not whip his peons. He had his girl educated in the United States, and took more interest in mechanics than any of them, though he couldn't handle a tack hammer. I didn't want to see him shot.

There was no sign of Con; so I thought I would try and get Bud on the radio. I went into the shack, and as soon as I turned on the switch, he was there on his wave length. Seemed he knew more about the trouble down here than I did. The home papers were carrying a story of an insurrection that had broken out in Oriente. The dispatches from Mexico City, Bud said, had it that the leader of the insurrection, Governor Savilla, had fought a battle in the open field with the forces of the government, and had been captured, tried and executed.

That was smart work; Mexico gets out its propaganda before things are pulled. Con was right; Savilla was already officially dead; the whole thing was cut and dried. They beat us in propaganda every time.

All I could do was to tell Bud that I would give him the full story when I got home and that we were starting right away; then I got the shock of my life, when Elsa came on the air and told me not to dare come unless I brought Con with me safe and sound. Of course Con had made his usual personal hit with her, as with everybody else, but the papers up there knew more than we did and had made Con a hero. She thought Con had been helping the patriotic General Savilla to establish a real government, and that quiet little, sweet little blonde gave it to me hot and strong not to desert him.

I had not time to put her right, for I heard Con calling me. I just switched off and came out. There he was with the bags. "Jim," he whispered the moment I got to him, "do what I tell you no matter how foolish it sounds."

"What's the idea?" I said, for Con was breathing hard and seemed tuned up to his old fighting self.

"Lola will marry me if I pull off *una maravilla*—a miracle. You did it with your sparks; I'm going to try another."

"How?" I asked.

But just then the soldiers crowded round.

"Señor Capitán," barked Con at me, giving me another notch of promotion, "you will try out our plane in a short flight before we go."

Something was doing, but what I could not guess. Perhaps those papers Elsa had been quoting were right; perhaps Con was deeper in this revolution than I had thought. But I had no time to ask questions or tell him what I heard from Elsa, with all those soldiers around us. For the first time in my life I did what I was told without asking why.

"You need a new fish, Jim," said Con. "You'll have to fake one; anything will do to carry the antenna."

I knew Con was afraid to talk to me too much, even in English, for some of these new soldiers might know a little. I figured Con was going to work his *maravilla* by radio, and that was enough to make me happy. We had never replaced that fish we had lost when we fell in the Imperial Valley, for we had not yet got down to instructing those fellows in using radio in the air.

Con went into the engine room and soon returned with an iron bucket and a coil of wire.

"This will do. You see, amigos," he said to the soldiers, *"el capitán* must get his bearings *por los radios."*

He hopped into the fuselage alongside me.

"Set fire to what's in that bucket, before you throw it over and trail it behind the plane," he whispered; then barked the rest of his orders aloud. "Go up five thousand feet, fly east ten miles and back, west ten miles and back, north ten miles and back, and down; keep strictly to your compass bearings, watch your drifts and air currents. Do I have to repeat, señor?"

"Not on your life," said I.

Those orders were branded into my brain by feeling sure Con was pulling something big, but I didn't have time to think what they meant.

The soldiers kicked away the chocks, as I gave her the gun; the engine roared and the propeller buzzed. The soldiers cheered as I taxied off. I made a clean hop across the valley. I wasn't used to night flying by myself; I didn't have Con's bird-man sense, but I just watched my dials, kept climbing high and straight and saying over and over again Con's orders to set fire to what was in the bucket and fly ten miles east and west and north.

It was easier going than I expected. I must have improved in my flying, for there was no horizon that makes a fellow automatically adjust his control. The air was good. The lights from the power house disappeared. I soon knew I was five thousand feet above those yellow hills; then I reached for the bucket. Con had knotted one end of the wire round the handle, and I tied the other end to a strut.

Con had said nothing about sending any wireless messages, and I knew perfectly well that bucket was not going to be used as a fish. It was packed full of old sacks soaked with crude oil. Of course Con wanted me to trail some kind of flare across the hills, perhaps as a signal to some rescuing army of Savilla's friends. It looked like a big story for Bud.

I knew by this time that Con was in on all the politics of the State, and that his *maravilla* was going to be a last-minute rescue. But all the same, it seemed a slim chance to start a counter-revolution with a bucket of burning rags five thousand feet in the air. Then, because I was a mechanic, not a soldier, I couldn't be satisfied just to obey orders, but had to improve on them with some little side patents of my own. The fire in that bucket, I figured, might blow out, trailing behind a plane going one hundred miles an hour. So, as the fire was the big idea and not the bucket, I mopped up all the oil with the rags till they were sopping, took off my coat and bound it round the rags with the wire, so that the oil would burn longer, and lit it. I was nearly choked with the thick smoke that came up from that

burning ball. I allowed it to catch all I could before I threw it over. Only the windward side blew out. The flames trailed behind till it looked like a great comet; and the wind helped it to burn more fiercely.

Next came the rest of the order. I flew to all the compass points Con directed. I was nearly freezing from the need of my coat—but only on my skin; inside I was hotter than that fireball. This was great! Shooting through the sky dragging a smoky comet after you to start a just war!

But every time I turned, I met that smoke again, making me cough, blinding my goggles and greasing my fingers with the soot.

Then I came back and I could see below that Con had turned all the lights in the power house on and strung fresh ones outside, to make my landing easy. Before I came down, though, I dropped the flare. It went down like a rocket stick, still shooting sparks and smoke. When I landed the soldiers were laughing.

"Go and wash your face," said Con.

"Was it all right? How's the miracle?" I whispered.

"Don't know yet; but you're black, and the bus is a sight."

I caught one look at the bottom of the fuselage and the under sides of the wings. Our nice white plane was sooted up as black as a crow. So were my face and clothes. I cleaned them all I could in the power house, and helped myself to a working coat of Xibera's, which I found in the shack.

When I came back to the field, Con was still explaining to the grinning soldiers that there was something wrong with the combustion of that engine, and that was why he had sent me up first to try it out.

By this time it was dawn. Those razor-back hills were standing out against a pale lemon sky. It was that hour of the morning when men look like ghosts. A cold wind was rising, and I would have given anything for a cup of coffee or a shot of that wine in the hacienda. Con's face seemed to me to grow green as he pointed across the valley. I saw a slow procession coming out of the door in the wall. It was the firing party.

They marched down the valley and across the bridge. I could see the old general's white hair, for he was bareheaded. Soldiers were all around him with fixed bayonets. Alongside the general marched the old priest carrying a long, gold cross.

"Con," I whispered.

"Wait," he answered. His face was white.

They marched the general up and backed him against the wall of the power house. The soldiers formed round him in three sides of a square. Now that they were nearer and the light was better, I could see they were not as steady as they had seemed when marching. They were not so sure they were doing the right thing, after all; they kept looking toward the hills; they were restless; they didn't feel safe—for that's what they mean by feeling right. Even Gomez, who was in charge, kept pulling his mustache so hard that it must have hurt him. The affair was too cold-blooded, even for him. Xibera was making a mistake in staging so much law and order. By this time I hadn't a hope left, but I couldn't help wondering if somehow Con was not figuring on this, that perhaps these fellows' nerves would break; perhaps there would be an argument and a mix-up when we might have a chance to put the general in the bus and hop off.

But it looked hopeless; the horrible thing was coming closer; the six men who were to do the killing were drawn off under the command of that scrubby Perez; the padre lifted his cross and prayed; the soldiers presented arms, and the officers drew their swords.

The sun behind me just began to peep over the hills; I could feel its warmth in the back of my neck and see it glinting in the windows of the hacienda, when the padre dropped his cross out of his limp hand as he stared up at the sky.

"Don't move," whispered Con.

I kept stock-still, with my eyes on the guns of the firing party. Then the soldiers began to look up at the sky, turning their eyes to the sun. The priest fell on his knees and began praying very loudly.

"Maravilla, maravilla!" I heard the soldiers say, as they dropped their guns. The bell of the church began to ring—not like a funeral service, but a loud, crazy ringing, as if it was a fiesta.

"Good boy, Pedrillo," breathed Con.

"Santa María del Guadelupe!" shouted the priest, as he rose to his feet and began running toward the church.

I heard Xibera cursing, but nobody paid any attention to him, for all the soldiers were following the priest, who was sprinting to the church to give thanks for the *maravilla* of Santa María del Guadelupe.

Then I turned around and looked up and saw what had stampeded them. Across the gold of the rising sun was a great moving black cross—a cross of clouds, it seemed. But it was not clouds; it was smoke—smoke from that bundle of burning oil rags Con had made me trail to the four points of the compass. It kept its shape wonderfully in the light wind and swelled as it came nearer, filling the sky over our heads. Con's *maravilla* was only smoke writing smeared across the face of the morning; but all the same, with that frightened army, those joy bells from the church, that white-faced prisoner on his knees, I couldn't help feeling that there was something of a miracle in Con's thinking it all out. But Xibera was the first to recover his wits.

"Muerte, muerte!" he shouted, drawing his gun to carry out the execution himself.

Con stepped up to him, knocked up the gun, and laid him out with a punch just under the ear.

"Tie him up," said Con, "and put the general in the plane, while I get Lola. We're safe so long as that cross keeps its shape and Pedrillo rings the bell."

I could find no rope in the power house, but there was plenty of wire. I wound Xibera in a coil of it, just as if I was making a transformer. I would have soldered that wire, if I'd had time, but I twisted it round his neck and into the small of his back; and those twists were linemen's splices, believe me. Before leaving him, I searched him. I had studied politics enough down here to try and get anything I could on the other side. I found a large leather pocketbook which I took a peek at before I put it in mine. It was full of papers, letters and handbills. Some of these I knew were in Russian, so I kept them.

Then I got the old man, and as I lifted him into the plane, I heard shots. I saw Con coming from the gate of the hacienda with Lola. He was shooting back into the house. They hurried down the hill and no one followed them. Con was deadly at revolver practice. They reached the bus, as the bell stopped ringing. The soldiers were coming out of the church. The cross of smoke was now out of shape; the *maravilla* was not working so well. They had heard Con's shots and the officers ordered their men to advance on us. Shooting from behind stone walls, taking what cover they could, they came on; but luckily not shooting very straight. I saw the plane was headed up the field and we would have to take off right over them, within easy range of their bullets. We would need another *maravilla* to save our oil tanks from being shot through. As per usual, Con supplied it.

"Help me with these, Jim," he said, asking me to lift into the fuselage a large box of those light bulbs he had been spreading outside for my landing of last night. The army was coming closer and their bullets were whizzing all round us, as we climbed into the plane.

Con gave her the gun and we taxied toward them. We rose and flew over their heads.

"Pelt them with those lamps, Jim," said Con.

We were unarmed except for this ammunition. I had no gun; Con had emptied his, and had no time to reload. But those lamps exploding as they burst among the soldiers were near enough to bombs to scatter them. They hid for a moment—long enough for us to fly over the church and out of their range.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DROP FROM THE SKY.

WE were heading north, far from Oriente, flying home, away from executions, revolutions, mañanas and murder. The smoky cross was now just a distant cloud bank. The Gulf was to our left, and on the ocean beyond there was smoke, perhaps from American ships. We were tightly packed in that three seater. Lola hung on to her father, covering him with her cloak, because he was not dressed for flying, and it became colder as we ascended.

The first thing I thought of was dropping an antenna and trying to listen in on Bud. Some sort of story of our escape would be sure to be given out, and he would be sitting all day at his station waiting for a word from me. But I couldn't send, because we had left our storage batteries behind, and would not have had time to charge them, anyway. I managed to get at my receiver without having to ask our passengers to step out on the wings.

I tied a wrench to a length of repair wire and dropped it over the side. I put the phones on, but got nothing.

Then I opened the pocketbook I had taken from Xibera, and pulled out all those foreign papers. Some were passports with photos of Xibera. And some were letters in English from people in the United States. I can't tell who they were; the authorities have those papers now. They were packets of political TNT. I have never even given Bud those names. All I did just then was to shove the letters back into the pocketbook, and put it out of sight.

Then I felt a pull on my arm; the old general was pointing back to Oriente. The sun was now high; the smoky cross was now just a dark stain, but just above the sun was a dark, moving speck.

"Xibera!" cried the general.

He was right; that speck was the monoplane. Xibera must have been released. The miracle was over; he had taken the air in the plane to follow us. I pointed him out to Con. Con only laughed and shrugged his shoulders. Con had no worries now, with his hand on his control stick, a good ship under him, and Lola on board.

But I was worried. I knew Xibera was no blind, hot-headed fool now. He was as good a mechanic as I was, in his way—a mechanic in high-grade murder. He would not be chasing us, unless he thought he had a fighting chance of bringing us down or driving us back. His plane was faster than ours, and we were heavily loaded and not making our best speed. Xibera could catch us before we made the border; the air above Mexico was Mexican territory; we had nearly murdered him and were helping the escape of a lawfully condemned prisoner.

"Make seaward," I called to Con, pointing back to where Xibera was climbing above our level.

Con looked serious now, and headed out to sea. He, too, realized that while we were over Mexico we were liable to

Mexican methods. We had seen what those were on land, and Con did not want them flying above him. Our best chance was the open sea and perhaps getting in touch with some of those ships. Xibera most certainly would carry some kind of gun. We had only one, and Con had shot away all his ammunition.

If Xibera had taken the air in a blind rage to bring us down, he could get away with it. Even Lola would not count with him. After Con had cut him out with her, he was liable to want to see her crashed. Xibera had more brains than I had, but there was something wrong with his assembling.

We had crossed the Gulf, and Lower California was below us, when Xibera swooped down and began shooting. He was aiming to hit our oil tanks, and crash us before we reached the ocean. Con jerked back his shoulders and went at once into war conditions. He dropped his grin, forgot everything but the fight. He had nothing to fight with but the way he handled his plane. Xibera had taken a wide sweep. All Con could do was to maneuver his plane so as to give Xibera the smallest possible target.

"Strap 'em in!" he called back to me.

In our hurry we had not done that. It had not seemed necessary on an easy, level, fine-weather flight home. But now I fixed the straps as best I could around Lola and the general, and hooked myself between them, so that the three of us could hang on somehow. I knew Con was going to do stunts, if necessary, the next time Xibera zoomed down with his automatic.

Xibera had climbed so as to get the altitude advantage; and, sure enough, he came at us again. This time Con did a nose dive, just as Xibera came over our heads. Con knew Xibera's plane. Con knew that Xibera had a firing angle in every direction except immediately under the nose of his plane. Con dodged his shots by simply dropping and turning over. Xibera did not know enough to bank and side slip. He just passed over our heads as we dived. I could see my antenna and its fish wriggle, as if it was swimming in the vortex of his propeller. We had escaped Xibera's bullets the same way a man dives under a shark to avoid his bite. If I'd had a gun I could have riddled Xibera from below. We went right side up, as Con flattened out, and began to climb hard, getting all he could out of his gas.

Xibera had flown away toward the sea and was wheeling round for a return attack. He was no match for Con at stunts, but he was clever enough to learn as he went along.

By this time the ocean was nearer; I could see ships far off. Lola and her father had behaved splendidly; not a sound out of either of them.

Then my feet felt something loosen; I knew it was our two guardian angel parachutes, slipped out of the locker. They wouldn't be much help to us now, for only Con and I knew how to handle them. Yet, somehow, I kept thinking about them. I couldn't do anything else but think, not having a gun.

Then I heard code and got Bud's call. Bud was Q. S. A-ing me, but I couldn't get much more than his call, for Con was jazzing that bus with side steps, slips, stalls, spirals—all the tricks he knew to keep Xibera guessing. But one thing I recognized, and that was Elsa's fist. I knew without hearing her sending any clearer that she was saying what she did last night—to do my best to help Con. So I knew I had to get into this fight.

When Xibera came close again—and this time he hung just above our right wing like a great, ugly eagle, waiting his chance to pounce within shooting distance—I pulled out that pocketbook and began waving it to him. To make sure he would not miss it, I opened it and drew out a poster with a lot of big Rus-

sian letters on it. Neither of us could wigwag, but I saw him lift his binoculars. The poster blew out of my hand, but he must have guessed what I meant for he waved his hand to me. I was trying to find out whether he wanted to kill us, or just to get those papers, which would blow up him and his party all over the world.

Con looked back and saw me dickering with the enemy.

"Found these in his pocket," I called. "It's all he wants. I'm going to throw them over. He'll pick 'em up and leave us alone."

"If you do, I'll throw you!" yelled Con. "I know all about those papers. I've picked his pocket and read them myself. They belong to our government."

When Con spoke like that, I had to obey. He had enough to do to handle his ship, without insubordination from me, for Xibera was crowding him, trying to keep him over the land, and Con could not climb faster than the monoplane. Con could not go on repeating those nose dives unless he had altitude, and we were constantly dropping.

Of course I could have tossed those papers out to Xibera, but I couldn't be sure that that would save us. Xibera by this was probably fighting mad, too, and might keep on trying to bring us down. I had to have something better, so I put my arms around Lola and spoke into her little pink ear.

"Help me to get into this parachute," I said.

I needed her help, because we were so crowded that the 'chute was tangled up with our feet. She gave one look down, then at that ugly monoplane ready to spit more bullets, and nodded. The only way I could help her and her father and Con to escape from those bullets, was to jump from the plane; then Xibera would follow me to get those incriminating papers. I owed this much to Con; I wanted to do it for Lola, too. Besides, I wanted to make good with my own girl.

Con did not notice what we were doing. His eyes were on Xibera; he had to be ready at a wink to do something the moment he saw Xibera slip the automatic over the side. Xibera was now trying to fly level with us, and at our speed. He must have guessed we had nothing to shoot with, so he had no bullets to fear. Flying at the same speed, he could take a steady aim; it would be as easy as taking pot shots at a still target.

When the parachute was strapped on me, I again waved the pocketbook at Xibera and jumped. I remembered Con's training and pulled the string after I had counted six watch ticks, so as not to foul with our plane. The 'chute tore out of the bag and filled over my head with the usual loud *pop!* I heard the roar of Con's propeller over my head getting fainter, as he went ahead and I fell behind him in the land wind. I was sitting still and quiet and peaceful in my straps and floating down to the earth. The sea was not far off, and I could now see a sail. But better than that, looking up past the wabbly umbrella that kept me in the air, I could see Xibera had wheeled and was coming after me. Con's bus was safe for a while.

Then I looked down and saw I was heading straight for a rocky cliff fringed with foam and long lines of waves, which always look still from a height, like contour lines on a chart.

I had to do some radio-frequency thinking. Funny what a lot you can think in a few watch ticks, and how long they can seem. That 'chute looked as if it was going to drag me over those rocks; it might tangle the lines in the top of the cliff, spill out its air, and let me drop.

Farther off, I could see a sloop standing close into shore, and I recognized the cut of her sails. It was the *Osprey*

of Commodore Hastings. Then I remembered how I had seen Con once steer a 'chute, when he had come near landing on a factory chimney. My only hope now was to try and do the same. The light wind blew along and slightly off the shore. I reached and hauled down the ropes on the weather side of the 'chute, the same as you try and trim a jib weathering a point close hauled. It was tricky work, for if I pulled it too much that thin umbrella of light silk would crumple and I would crash at hundreds of feet a second. The big umbrella canted a little, held the wind nicely and carried me out over the cliffs above the sea. I was saved from falling on the rocks that were churning up the surf below me, when Xibera zoomed down and began shooting. I saw one of his bullets go through the silk, letting in a strip of blue sky. All I could do to save myself from falling in a tangle of silk and rope was to reach for my knife and cut myself loose from my straps. I was falling, dropping into smooth sea, and hoping to Heaven it was not too shallow.

I did better than land on the hard sands of shallow water; I fell into a mass of kelp. I hit that thick bank of sea vegetable as we had landed in the corn. I could feel the long strings of it coiling round me; but it broke my fall, and I did not hit bottom. I managed to paddle up to the surface, but could make no swimming headway, for those long weeds were tangled all round my arms and legs. I just floated and took a look round. A boat was coming toward me. Xibera was buzzing over my head. He was afraid to light, for his plane was not a hydro, and afraid to shoot, because of those men in the boat. I was picked out of the kelp and rowed toward the *Osprey*. I was messed up with weed and slime, and still dirty from the soot of my joy ride with that crude oil comet; so old Hastings did not recognize me, when I climbed on board. As usual he was mad and cussing.

"Say, what's the idea?" he bawled. "Can't you wait till I get my guns ashore?"

"Captain Hastings," I said, "those guns are not going ashore. General Savilla is flying north to the United States in that plane."

Con had come after me but had turned north as soon as he saw I was picked up. I waved my arm to show him I was alive. He had no fear of Xibera shooting at him or me, now that an American vessel was standing by.

"The revolution is busted," I said, "and the worst germ that Mexico has is in that other bus."

"Isn't that General Xibera in that plane?" he said.

"It is," I answered, "but let me have a rifle and he won't be there much longer."

He recognized me at last.

"Why, you ain't Jim Crewe, are you?"

"Capitán Crewe," I said, "late flying instructor to the forces of *el Goberna dor* Savilla, now just a mechanic out of a job. Give me a rifle, will you? I can pick him off from your crosstrees."

But Hastings would not let me have a rifle. And besides, Xibera, after reading some signal flags Hastings' mate had run up to his masthead, had flown ashore and landed his plane on the beach, probably expecting his cargo to be brought ashore. But I blocked that, when I told Hastings more of what had happened.

"You can take those arms back to the United States," I said, "and me, too —not as an engineer but as passenger. If you don't, I've got enough to fire you out of your citizenship or land you in some jail."

Hastings went blue in the face at this, and he was backed by an ugly crew. They were all dressed up like swell yachtsmen, but were really bootleggers,

tough chaps that used the border for all sorts of smuggling—from cocaine to chinks. They were lined up behind him—worse than Xibera's firing party. And I had no miracle to help me out; nothing but bluff would help me now. So bluff I did!

"Of course you can throw me to the sharks," I said. "But remember, Captain Hartigan has seen you take me on board. He has the papers with all your names and your records in these waters. Take me back to San Diego, and I promise you those papers will be destroyed. It's your best bet, isn't it? Meantime, rustle me a drink, will you, while you think it out."

The bluff won. I was not thrown into the sea, and I was given the drink, a meal and a bunk, while the *Osprey* pulled down the flag she had been signaling to Xibera with, and headed north. Xibera was left on the beach—and he may be there yet for all I know.

Late that evening we pulled into the harbor, and Con was there to meet me. There was a gang of reporters with him, but I got him aside with Hastings.

"Con," said I, "I promised Commodore Hastings and his crew nothing would happen to them if they brought me back. These papers contain a lot of names the government would like to get. Can you hold back those with Hastings' name on them?"

I passed the pocketbook to Con.

"So you had the papers?" said Hastings, quiet, now that he was licked and in home waters. "You shrimp; you pulled a bluff on me."

"Sure; I didn't have a gun," I said.

"I will keep any letters incriminating you," Con said to him, "as a guarantee that you will quit gun running."

Then I made Con promise not to tell the reporters too much. They were not going to get my story.

I got ashore and headed for the long-distance phone. That story was to be Bud's scoop. And, besides, I wanted to tell Elsa how I had worked a little *maravilla,* too, with her help.

A daring aviator lands in a desolate, unknown part of Mexico, and from that promising take-off there speeds a thrill-filled novel involving a señorita, a prison escape via the air, and one of the most hair-raising airplane stunts ever recorded. Next week. "High Blue," by Will McMorrow.

THE APPRECIATIVE FRIEND

FRANK P. MORSE, the Washington banker, and Forney Emerson, lawyer and man about town, are such devoted friends that Emerson, who loves a practical joke, feels free to kid Morse whenever he can think of a way to put over what he sometimes mistakenly regards as humor.

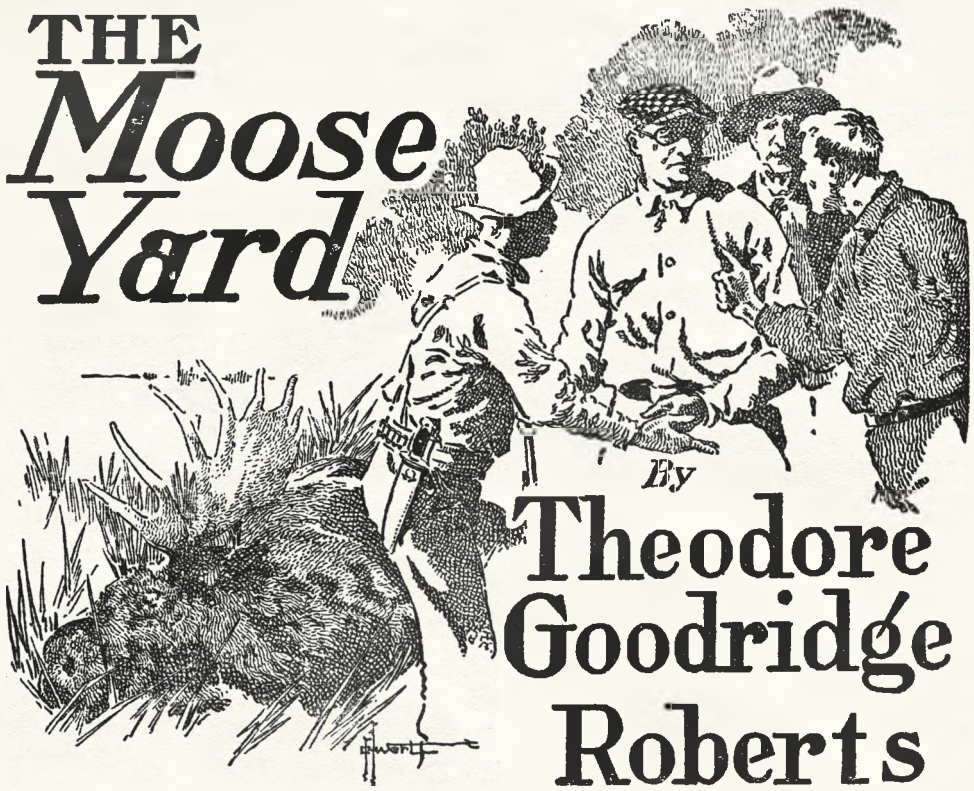
The last time Emerson went to San Francisco he sent Morse a telegram, charges collect, reading:

I am perfectly well. Hope you enjoy paying for the tidings.

Nine days later Emerson, still in the California city, received an express package on which he had to pay six dollars and forty-eight cents charges. When he unwrapped it, he found that the contents consisted of a brick on which was pasted the following gratifying typewritten information:

This is the weight your telegram lifted from my anxious heart.

THE Moose Yard



By

Theodore Goodridge Roberts

Author of "Kin to the Campbells," "Masterless Men," Etc.

Young MacIver, the golden-haired Highlander who has not always been successful in taking the part of his fellow immigrants in Canada, makes a bold stand against a great man—and gains the day.

WINTER struck the Waakadoggan country in a night. There had been weeks of chilly weather, with black-and-white frosts creeping through the alder swamps and over the ridges from dark till dawn. Snow had fallen three times, only to vanish by noon. The snipe and woodcock were gone, having started for warmer latitudes within an hour of discovering that they could no longer sink their flexible-tipped bills down to their food in the frozen mud.

The grackles had gathered in loud flocks long since and were gone with the robins and swallows. The passenger pigeons had darkened the sky in migrating millions and vanished like smoke in the wind. Ducks of every variety, black and wood and pintail and whistler, were gone, and the trumpeter swans and gray geese were going daily and nightly, trumpeting and honking high against the pale sun and frosty stars.

Still pools and the shallow edges of streams and backwaters were covered with ice thinner than cream on a pan of thin milk.

The MacDonalds and Camerons of the new settlement on the Waakadoggan mistook all this for winter, so vast was their ignorance of the land of their adoption, and they laughed at it. It was nothing to the winters of Old Scotia. And they laughed at "Big John" MacDonald, who was always croaking

of cold and hungry days to come and preaching preparedness in the matters of food and dry fuel. Hungry days! Absurd! Did not the valley teem with flesh and fish, even as Major Pottle had promised?

They had shot hundreds of wild pigeons, knocking eight or ten out of the tree at every bang of the gun, and Charlie Cameron had killed a fat buck deer in his dooryard with a fling of an ax. And four of the settlers, including Big John MacDonald himself, had shot moose. Then winter struck in a night, and the laughter of the immigrants froze on their lips and in their astonished hearts.

The cold struck and numbed and shackled the swift Waakadoggan, clamping its fetters of ice between sunset and sunrise. The river resisted, but the best it could do was to keep breathing places open here and there above the twisted hearts of its strongest rapids. The cold racked and snapped the sinews of the forest. It flowed through the ill-chinked walls of the cabins of Glenranald like an icy flood.

The settlers crawled from their couches and blew the embers on their hearths to flame, and fed the flames with the driest wood at hand. A wind came up with the sun and drove the cold through wool and fur. The settlers shivered even on the edges of their crackling hearths, for the fires thereon seemed to have no more warmth than painted pictures of fires. The sun had neither heat nor color.

The wind shifted at noon. The sky dulled and the cold relaxed. Snow commenced to fall an hour later, sifting down thin and dry and fine through the black spruces. Men and lads went out with axes and ropes in search of dry wood. They were not experienced woodsmen, and their axes, which they had brought with them from their old homes, were poor things for the task in hand, being too broad of blade and short of haft. And the driest wood was the toughest—old dead pines, for the most part, which had dried without rotting.

The cold and apprehensive Highlanders hacked and hewed in the thickening fall of snow until drops of perspiration hopped and ran on them, and as they dragged home the inadequate results of their toil, they felt heavy forebodings of the future. Of the eleven heads of households in Glenranald Settlement, Big John MacDonald alone was not anxious about his supply of fuel.

He had plenty of wood, both dry and green, stacked against his house. He was no cleverer than the others and no less ignorant of the new land, but a combination of inborn characteristics made a good provider of him—among other and less admirable things. Being by nature jealous, acquisitive, ambitious, vain, energetic and thrifty, he was not one to overlook any chance of acquiring something for nothing.

So he and his sons had toiled mightily at the gathering of fuel, which was to be had for the taking, and they had hunted moose and deer and caribou, which were also to be had for the taking but had proved difficult to take, and he had caught more trout, and shot more pigeons during their passage of the valley, than any other man in the settlement. He had salted down as many of the birds and fish as he had salt for. Had he been cleverer he would have built a smoke house and preserved more.

Even Big John MacDonald was daunted by that first eighteen-hour stroke of real winter, for it exceeded his most pessimistic imagining by many degrees. He wondered if even he were prepared for the months to come. But at noon, when the wind shifted and the cold moderated and snow began to fall, he felt his old self again.

He went out after a substantial midday meal, but not to rustle wood like his improvident neighbors. He went out to

watch them rustling it and to remind them of the fact that he had advised them to get ready for rough weather. He enjoyed himself that afternoon, for no man could deny the soundness of his advice. But he did not increase his popularity in the settlement.

Snow continued to fall until all that wilderness was smothered hip deep with it. All nature disappeared under the blanket of white.

That first stroke of thirty-below-zero weather neither daunted nor surprised Alasdair MacIver of Glenbhrec in his lodge of bark and poles and green hides. The lodge was tight and banked all around with boughs of spruce and fir. When the fire in the middle of the floor required feeding, all one had to do was make a long arm around an edge of the door flap and pull in a stub of cedar, a slab of old blow-down pine as dry as bone, or a stick of barky birch, for MacIver and his companions were prepared for cold weather.

Their axes, which MacIver had purchased on the main river at the advice of "Two Blanket" Sabattis, were narrow of blade and long of haft and balanced to a wish. Alasdair MacIver, and Angus MacDonald, his enforced guest, and his two self-appointed Malicete followers, were warm and well fed. They remained housed, except for an occasional trip to the cache of smoked and frozen meat, until the storm of snow was over.

But they were not idle. They constructed rackets and a small toboggan. Two Blanket and Little Smoke were the experts at these tasks, but MacIver was the driving force. It was due to MacIver, who had read the journals of certain early French explorers and traders in Canada and Acadia, that the required woods had been collected and the strips of hide prepared for the stringing of the rackets.

A week of fine weather followed the storm of snow, and in the course of that week both MacIver and his guest learned to walk, and even to run, on their new snowshoes. Their first attempts were a series of tumbles and flounderings. Later, their legs were gripped by the painful *mal de raquette,* and the Malicetes had to rub the cramps out of the tortured muscles with hot bear's grease. After that they were able to flap along in a thoroughly workmanlike manner, and it was not long before MacIver began to display style and agility in his snowshoeing.

Angus MacDonald was worried about his family. He had sent a message to his mother, by Jud Snider, the trapper, within twelve hours of leaving home, but he had not set eyes on the house which he had helped to build, nor any inmate of it, since the evening Big John had ejected him for having asked a favor of MacIver on behalf of "Long Ian" Cameron's small daughter. He worried a long time in silence, feeling that the introduction of anything connected with his father, as a subject of conversation with his host, would be in doubtful taste —for Big John MacDonald's attitude and actions toward the generous and resourceful MacIver had been outrageous. But at last his anxiety overcame his sense of decorum.

"I'm wondering how they weathered that blast of cold in that windy house," he said. "You have seen the inside of that house yourself, Glenbhrec, and the cracks between the walls of it you could put a fist through. I have been seeing them in my dreams of late—all frozen stiff."

"Are you speaking of your family?" asked MacIver.

"Of my mother and sisters and brother, Glenbhrec. My father's mad vanity will keep *him* warm."

"They have blankets and warm clothing, I suppose."

Angus MacDonald nodded and gazed into the fire with an unsatisfied expression in his eyes and at the corners of his

mouth. The two Malicetes glanced from one Highlander to the other, but said nothing, for the conversation had been in Gaelic. After a silence of nearly a minute, Alasdair MacIver spoke again.

"How are they provisioned?" he asked. "If they are hungry, I'll feed them—as I would feed hungry Indians. I've had my fill of serving those MacDonalds and Camerons as a brother exile and a friend—but if they are hungry, I'll give them food. I'll throw it to them as to savage dogs, for fear of their teeth in my hand. I speak from a wounded heart, Angus—and a hardened heart. I fetched a canoe load of white flour to those people, and if Pottle has not sent up the remainder of their flour and meal by now, it is no fault of mine. I fetched a doctor to them. Twice I saved the life of that poor fool, Long Ian Cameron, and I saved your brother's life, and I snatched your father from the grapple of death three times. With what result? Big John MacDonald attempted my life with a foul blow!"

"He was drunk," whispered Angus. "Jud Snider told me. But I'm not defending him, Glenbhrec. Didn't I tell him to his whiskers that he was alive only by your mercy—that night he turned me out?"

"*You* befriended me—one in fifty—and yet I have befriended them all."

"I wasn't the only one. Mother and Jean cried shame on him, and Flora clouted his ear."

"For turning you from the door into the black night."

"No; it was for the names he laid on yourself, Glenbhrec. He called you a beggarly, red-headed Campbell gillie—and that is the fairest he named you. He said that you had run off with your master's fine clothes and silver spoons—and that is the fairest he said of you. And we all cried shame on him at that, and Flora clouted his ear."

"Flora? She is the one with eyes like—— She is the older of your two charming sisters, I think."

"Yes. She is the one who thinks you must be the Marquis of Lorne, or some other great lord of Argyll, in trouble with the royal court or with MacCailean Mor himself by no fault of your own; and she is a scholar and a reader of history—the only scholar in the family."

"Lorne? She means it kindly, I've no doubt, for she has kind eyes. I'm sib to that house, there's no denying it; but my name is MacIver and my chief is Glenaora. And MacIvers of Glenaora were cocking their bonnets in kings' council rooms before the first Campbell had so much as the appellation of a farmstead to tack to his name. I'm no lord, nor lord's heir, but the fifth son of a poor Highland gentleman. I was given a gentleman's education in everything but the English and was the best pistol shot and broadsworder in the Three Glens. But I'm no marquis. If it was a marquis your sister felt a kindly interest in, then I am the loser."

"You don't know her, Glenbhrec. It was your manners took her fancy, and your grand clothes, and the silver crest on your sporran and the elegant hilt to your *sgian-dubh*. It was your gentility—a thing she's little accustomed to in the family—and the wonder is she didn't make an exiled king of you. She said you looked as a king should look."

The fire flamed up and painted roses on MacIver's lean cheeks.

"If you are anxious about your family, your mother and sisters, you must visit them to-morrow morning," he said. "That is your duty to your estimable mother, who impressed me as being a dame of very superior parts. I scarcely remember my own mother, who died when I was very small. A gift would be in order, to let her know that your affection has not lessened."

"A gift, Glenbhrec? What have I to give?"

"The skin of the big bear which we killed ten days ago might prove acceptable in this weather, for it is warm and soft."

"But *you* killed the bear."

"What of that? I happened to hold the gun at the critical moment."

"But if I had held the gun when that bear turned on us——"

"There is no occasion for argument, my friend. The skin is yours, and you shall present it to your estimable mother to-morrow as a slight token of your affection. And if you think a smoked ham of venison would be acceptable, we'll take that along too."

When they looked out at the world next morning, all they could see of it was smoke and dust of snow flying and swirling, treetop high. The invisible forest shook and moaned behind the blinding veils of the storm, under the trampling of the bitter wind. It was not until an hour or so past noon that MacIver and his anxious guest set out for Glenranald. The force of the gale was spent by that time and only wisps and spurts of it remained. The harried snow had settled in crested drifts like frozen surf. The cold was intense.

MacIver led the way and young MacDonald followed exactly in his tracks. They moved down the wooded slope toward the river. Two Blanket Sabattis cried after them: "Mind dem air hole, M'Iver."

MacIver, who had acquired a useful English vocabulary by this time, turned and waved an arm in acknowledgment of the warning.

They made the five miles down to Big John MacDonald's clearing without accident and in good time, for the way was level and, for the most part, swept clear of snow. The cabin was drifted to the eaves on every side; and up on the roof appeared Big John and his elder son, Little John, like castaways on a surf-encompassed rock. Alasdair and Angus halted at that sight.

"They are mending the roof," said MacIver. "The wind must have clawed through it. The bark and sods should have been straddled with heavy timbers."

"There's plenty of smoke at the chimney," said Angus, with evident relief. "But what's that they're laying on the roof?"

"It looks like blankets. Blankets and sticks from the woodpile."

"Blankets? Blankets on the roof and none on their beds! Why don't they go out and get more bark?"

"Perhaps they haven't any rackets. Perhaps they've never heard of such things, as they're not used beside Loch Lochy. They'd be forced to burrow like moles to get to the woods for bark. We'll have to lend them a hand, my friend."

"You don't know Big John MacDonald as I do, Glenbhrec—the crazy vanity of him. He will chase us away with curses."

"I'm beginning to know him. He may chase us away with curses, but not until we have handed over the bearskin robe and the venison, and fetched materials for the mending of the roof, in my humble opinion. I have read of such characters, just as I had read of snowshoes before ever experiencing the need of them. A polite education is a grand thing."

MacIver led the way across the drifted clearing. The two men on the roof ceased their work and stood staring. When the visitors halted on the crest of the drift they stood almost on a level with Big John and Little John. Angus was the first to speak.

"I see the wind did some damage to the roof," he said.

"Do you have to live with redskins and outcasts to see that?" returned Big John, in his worst manner.

Angus swallowed that and asked: "How's the family?"

"What family?"

"My family."

"Didn't know you had a family."

Little John spoke then. "Mother and the girls are hearty, lad."

His father turned on him and told him to keep his mouth shut.

"We've got a bearskin here for mother, and a haunch of smoked venison," said Angus. "Glenbhrec killed them and cured them."

"Glenbhre? Laird's style!" jeered Big John—but he rolled an eye at the big black pelt on his younger son's shoulder and at MacIver's burden, and greed and senseless ill-temper wrestled in him. Greed won.

"Give them here," he said.

The visitors unburdened themselves.

"If you had bark and brush for the mending of your roof, you'd save on blankets," remarked MacIver, speaking for the first time.

Big John only glared at him, but Little John explained their inability to reach the bark-bearing trees. So the visitors turned and plodded into the forest in search of material to replace that which had been blown from the MacDonald roof. They found a group of big canoe birches, from the massive trunks of which they peeled many square yards of thick, cream-colored bark. This they rolled and shouldered, and upon their return to the cabin they found Little John alone on the roof.

The three young men worked for an hour at repairing the damage. The job was all but completed, and only one small aperture remained to be covered, when the head and shoulders of Mrs. MacDonald appeared suddenly in their midst, thrust upward between the poles of the roof in the very spot for which the last piece of bark was intended.

"Mother!" cried Angus, dropping to his knees and embracing all that he could reach of the venturesome woman.

She clasped her arms about his neck. Her cheeks and eyes were bright with excitement.

"He said I wasn't to see you—or speak to you," she gasped. "But I was too quick for him—climbed the ladder too fast for him. But here he is. God bless you, son! God keep you safe!"

She released his neck and was drawn downward from his embrace until she vanished beneath the roof. The three young men heard sounds of scuffling in the loft below, then a sharp smack.

"That's Flora," said Little John, grinning. "She'll bring him to reason yet, if clouting him on the ear will do it. Every time she hears him name MacIver for a red-headed——"

But neither Alasdair nor Angus heard the rest of it, for at that moment the head and shoulders of Flora herself appeared through the gap in the roof from which her mother's had so recently disappeared. MacIver pulled off his fur cap at the sight and bowed low from the hips at the risk of sliding from the roof. But she did not acknowledge the salute by so much as a glance of her flashing eyes. She told Angus to stoop to her. He obeyed, and she whispered close in his ear.

"It's a lie!" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet.

Then she looked up fairly and squarely into MacIver's face. She had kind eyes, sure enough. Her smooth cheeks were pink as wild roses. Her lips were tremulous and slightly parted, as if about to speak—but not a word did she say. Neither did he speak, though he felt a wild urge to utter ardent and tender words. But their glances held, unwavering and eager and melting, until she disappeared. That disappearance was sudden. MacIver continued to gaze at the aperture in the roof with that same rapt and lost expression of eyes and mouth, until Little John MacDonald laughed.

"That's the great man who aims to command Glenranald!" John exclaimed, his voice high with derision. "He's the masterful man to set the world right.

He's gripping her tight now—but wait till she gets a hand free!"

"Would he hurt her?" asked MacIver, in a strange voice.

"No fear of that," John assured him. "She's the apple of his eye."

MacIver and Augus MacDonald went a mile of their homeward journey in silence. MacDonald was the first to speak. He came up to MacIver's shoulder and said bitterly: "You were right, Glenbhrec."

"What's that?" asked MacIver, startled out of his daydreams.

"You said you knew him. You said he would take what we had to give before sending us away. You were dead right!"

"He's welcome to it. But tell me something, my friend. What was it she whispered in your ear?"

"Flora? That was a lie of—of one of the Camerons. But I think the old man had a hand in it. Some one told her something about you and a—that there's an Indian girl up at your lodge. I gave it the lie."

MacIver laughed. Then he asked: "How is the meal holding out?"

"They didn't tell me, but if Pottle didn't keep his promise to you and send up six canoe loads before the river froze—and we'd have heard of it if he did—every meal bin in the settlement is empty by this time, as empty as they were when you fetched up that five hundredweight of white flour, Glenbhrec."

"Pottle! That Sassenach robber!" cried MacIver. "I'd all but forgot the existence of the fat rogue. But has he forgot *me?* Then he's a fool as well as a liar and coward and cheat, or he would have kept his promise—the promise I frightened out of him in his own house. Doesn't he realize yet that all the new settlers on the Waakadoggan are not ignorant cotters and crofters, that there's a right MacIver of Glenaora up in these woods, able and ready to protect the simple immigrants from the cheatery of thieving agents and tuppenny-ha'penny officials like himself? Or does he think I have deserted my poor Highlanders, my helpless fellow exiles? If so, he's even more of a fool than I thought. I'll look into this matter. I'll show him his mistake."

"You likened the poor exiles to savage dogs not long since, Glenbhrec," Angus reminded him, in a doubtful voice. "You said you would throw food to them, for fear of their teeth in your hand. And small blame to you. But now, fresh from more of my father's insults and ingratitude, you call them 'your poor Highlanders.' It's a riddle to me, Glenbhrec."

MacIver replied after a moment's hesitation, with averted face.

"Say you so? I must have been angry then. Now I'm only angry with Pottle and his kind. The insults of Big John MacDonald, the poor, jealous fellow—and the lies of other jealous ignoramuses—signify no more to me than the cawing of crows in a treetop."

It was Alasdair MacIver's firm intention to make the thirty-one-mile journey from Glenbhrec on the Waakadoggan to Kingston on the main river before Christmas in the interests of the bannockless MacDonalds and Camerons of Glenranald. He had already visited the town twice on behalf of these people, returning with five bags of wheaten flour for them on the first occasion and with a doctor for one of the Cameron babies on the second—but both those expeditions had been made by canoe.

The third would have to be done on snowshoes. Sixty-two miles of plodding webfooted like a duck! But he and Two Blanket were the lads who could do it, and do it handily—rests and meals and sleeps and a decisive action with Major Pottle all included—in three days. But that intention was not fulfilled. Opposing circumstances proved too strong even for Alasdair MacIver.

To begin with, investigation showed that the immigrants' most pressing need was not for the raw material for bannocks but for any kind of food. In five of the eleven cabins the larders were empty, and searching spoons were already ringing hollowly on the sides and bottoms of the black pots. Children were fretful with hunger. Desperate men and women, lacking rackets and the skill and materials to make them, struggled hip deep, waist deep in the snow around their drifted dwellings in search of food and got nothing for their trouble but frostbite.

So MacIver and his guest and his two Malicetes devoted three days to toting venison and bear meat and fish from the caches and smokehouse at Glenbhrec to the empty pots of Glenranald. They even furnished three of the unfortunate settlers with material and instructions for the manufacture of three pairs of snowshoes. All the blessings of heaven were called down upon MacIver's golden head, and he was embraced by men and women and children, and Angus MacDonald also was blessed and embraced. One excitable woman gripped Two Blanket Sabattis around the neck.

"Damn!" said Two Blanket. "Now we go starve."

"Now we go hunt some more," corrected MacIver. "An' ketchum fish some more."

He was proud of his recently attained command of the English language—as spoken and taught by Two Blanket and Little Smoke.

MacIver and young MacDonald went after fresh meat, while the two Malicetes set and tended numerous snares and traps and angled for trout through the ice of neighboring ponds. MacIver and MacDonald tramped countless miles in every direction until their rackets weighed like slabs of iron and their eyes smarted and dimmed with staring along white vistas. Twice they were caught abroad by blizzards and forced to dig in for the night.

For reasons unknown to them, they did not find hair nor sign of moose or caribou. It was as if those animals had fled the Waakadoggan country before the rigors of the season. In seven days of actual hunting they bagged only three deer. It was while carrying home the last of these that MacIver fouled one of his snowshoes in the prongs of a buried blow down and fell so heavily and crookedly that he sprained his right knee and broke the frame of his right racket. Angus toted him the rest of the way to the lodge, and Two Blanket bathed and bandaged the swollen joint, and Little Smoke went out and fetched in the deer.

The Malicetes' fishing and trapping had been more successful than the Highlanders' gunning. The storehouse was replenished with hundreds of frozen trout and scores of frozen hares, and pelts of mink and fox and lynx hung on stretching frames from the sloping walls of the lodge. Gifts of fish and rabbit and venison were distributed among the settlers at Glenranald by Angus MacDonald and Little Smoke.

But MacIver did not make the trip to Kingston, to demand the promised delivery of wheat and barley flour of Major Pottle, before Christmas. Nor did he make it after Christmas. He was still confined to the lodge, with his sprained knee still in bandages, on Christmas Day.

New Year's Day found him hopping about the fire and limping on a crutch in the immediate vicinity of home. On the fifth day of the new year he shuffled half a mile on his snowshoes, in Two Blanket's wake—and half a mile was enough. The injured knee swelled again that night. But the swelling subsided within twelve hours, under Two Blanket's treatment.

He did a mile on his second outing and three miles on his third, without

any ill effect. The strained tendons regained their former strength quickly after that.

MacIver heard of the moose yard in the second week of his enforced idleness. It was the first time he had ever heard of such a thing; and the Malicetes were forced to exert their utmost ingenuity in the use of words and signs before he grasped the idea.

He gathered, with difficulty, that Little Smoke had discovered, that very day, and only six miles to the south and west of the lodge, a thing, a place of peculiar significance; that the discovery signified moose, and was called a moose yard. Little Smoke had seen no moose, but only signs of them in the form of partially obliterated tracks leading around and through exceptionally dense thickets of browse.

This area of plentiful feed had been marked by a certain family of moose, or group of families, early in the fall, and the encircling and intersecting tracks had been made by the members of that group immediately after the first big snowstorm. The animals had then gone far afield, traveling easily through the deep snow and browsing in less desirable pastures. But they would return after the next heavy snowfall and trample out those tracks again. But why, as they did not browse there?

MacIver was puzzled and began to wish that he had taught Gaelic to the Malicetes instead of learning their English. Then he was told of the winter thaw, which usually comes in January, sometimes not until February—in exceptionally favorable years not until March.

He was told of the tough crust which forms on the snow after the thaw—a crust very thick and icy but not strong enough to support the weight of a moose or even of a deer—and of the effect of the cutting edges of that crust on the legs of all such moose and deer that attempted to travel through it. Then he fully realized the significance of the "yards" and was filled with admiration for the sagacity of these animals.

He understood that there would be no crust to cut their legs along the beaten trails of their selected reservations of superior browse. He understood that the later the occurrence of the first thaw, the longer would the animals be free to browse abroad and the briefer would be their confinement to the restricted crustless areas and therefore the less the danger of a shortage of feed before spring. He got it all at last and appreciated the importance of Little Smoke's discovery. He explained it to Angus MacDonald.

"And the sooner a thaw drives the animals into the yard known to Little Smoke, the sooner shall we know where to go for fresh meat," he concluded.

The Malicetes reckoned that this particular yard, judging by its extent, would be occupied in due course by from ten to fifteen head of moose, young and old, and perhaps a dozen deer.

MacIver's right knee was as good as ever by the middle of January. By sunset of the sixteenth it was decided that MacIver and Two Blanket should commence their long tramp to Kingston before the next sunrise. MacIver looked forward eagerly to the encounter with Major Pottle.

His recent inaction had lessened his own opinion of his importance on the Waakadoggan, and he feared that it might have weakened him also in the eyes of his followers. But he felt sure that another interview with the stout agent, with Two Blanket Sabattis looking on, would more than reëstablish his reputation as a strong man. He knew how to deal with that crooked coward, Pottle.

Two Blanket was the first of the inmates of the lodge to awaken on the appointed morning. He tossed bark and kindlings onto the embers of the fire,

thus arousing his companions, then pulled aside the door flap and thrust head and shoulders into the outer gloom. He sniffed questioningly, turning his face this way and that. He withdrew his head and looked at MacIver, who by this time was sitting upright in his blankets.

"No go Kingston," he said.

"No go? What for?" queried MacIver.

"No good. Sout' wind. Plenty wet."

He was right. MacIver went out and felt a soft mist on his face and the snow sodden to his feet. A drizzle of rain began soon after the lift of the veiled sun and continued, shaken occasionally by a gust of warm wind across wet treetops, until close upon sunset. The wind shifted before dark, puffing around the darkling horizon until it blew from the west, west by north, northwest, northwest by north. The first thaw had come and gone. The Malicetes informed MacIver that all the moose and deer in the country were in their yards by now. Caribou, unlike moose and white-tailed deer, do not yard up, but range all winter. They know of a way of breaking the crust without barking their shins.

MacIver and his companions were not the only people aware of the existence of the big moose yard situated six miles west of the junction of the Glenbhrec and the Waakadoggan. A wandering half-breed had seen and admired the western edge of it. Soon after Little Smoke had discovered its eastern edge, and, having made Jud Snider's camp that night and enjoyed Jud's hospitality, he had mentioned it to that redoubtable woodsman.

Jud Snider was a sociable and generous fellow. He was as pleasant a companion as any one could wish for, except when his temper was inflamed by too much brandy or rum. He had often struggled against his weakness for strong waters, but almost always in vain. He had often striven to keep his temper cool while "in liquor," but almost always in vain. So he had given up that struggle years ago and retired to the wilderness, where rum and brandy and Hollands were harder to come by than in the settlements and were, even when the difficulty of procuring the spirits had been overcome, the opportunities for encountering and doing bodily injury to his kind were practically nonexistent.

He was an expert woodsman and riverman and a successful trapper and hunter, but he hated the solitary life. He had once tried to work with a partner, and things had gone very well until, after six sociable and profitable weeks, he had celebrated the success of the experiment with two bottles of rum. The partner had escaped with his life by no more than the skin of his teeth.

Poor Jud Snider! He realized that solitude was his portion unless he could master his craving for spirits. As he could not master that craving, he did his best to live the solitary life. He tried hard to do the right thing. Sometimes he went for weeks on end without so much as a swallow of liquor, and for months on end without a glimpse at a human face.

Then one or the other of his cravings, or an irresistible combination of both, would grip him and gnaw him. Then echoes of old songs and laughter, and visions of lamplit rooms and uncorked bottle would haunt his nights and days. He would forget the whereabouts of his traps; his keen eyes would dim along the barrel of his rifle; his legs would tire on the trail and his arms to the thrust of the canoe pole; and the moaning of the wind in the trees would shake and chill his heart.

Then he would flee the wilderness, perhaps for a few days, perhaps for a week or more—and always upon his return he swore that he would never visit town or settlement again.

Both cravings had their teeth and claws in Jud Snider's vitals on the evening of the wandering half-breed's arrival at Jud's camp. Jud had been suffering torments of loneliness and thirst, and of loathing for the black-and-white frozen desolation around him, throughout the day and the night before and the day before that.

He was glad to see the chance visitor, and to feed him and talk to him. Watching the wanderer devour pancakes and fried pork and molasses sharpened his own flagging appetite. Fortunately for the visitor, there was nothing to drink but tea. After supper and a few pipes of strong tobacco and a little desultory talk, the visitor slept.

Snider went to the door and looked out at the shadowy night. He heard the harsh cry of a lucifee, softened by distance and to his hungry imagination it sounded like a peal of tavern laughter. The snapping of the frost in the sinews of the dark forest rang on his bewitched ears like the clinking of glasses.

Snider was awake and up and about before dawn. He transferred what little money he possessed from its hiding place to a pocket, made a pack of blankets and the lightest and most valuable of his peltries, cooked a large breakfast and then aroused his guest.

"Where're ye headin' for, Baptiste?" he asked.

The wanderer did not know exactly. Nowhere in particular. Wherever the most grub could be had for the least work, was his ultimate goal. He explained that he was not very rugged, having been overworked by his parents in his youth, but that he was the soul of honesty.

"I got business in town," Snider told him urgently. "You stop here three-four days—till I come back. Tend my traps. Plenty pork an' molasses an' tea. All the tabac ye kin smoke."

The half-breed agreed to that, and Jud Snider was halfway to Kingston before the thought occurred to him that he had not disclosed the whereabouts of his traps. But what of it? The traps would have been left to look after themselves if Baptiste had not turned up. To the devil with them!

Snider quickened his pace townward. The pull on the strings of his lonely heart increased almost to the breaking point. He talked to himself, he sang, he longed for wings, he licked his lips in gloating anticipation of tingling moisture ahead.

Jud Snider found the company and the liquor he craved long before the candles were lit that night; and after the lighting of the candles he found more company and more liquor. But it was not until well past midnight that the urge to knock off the heads and stave in the ribs of four or five of his fellow bibbers became irresistible. The odds were heavily against him, and he had not made much progress with his self-imposed task when the landlord of the King's Head Tavern arrived on the scene.

"Don't hurt 'im, gentlemen," said stout Ben Barley. "Jud ain't a bad feller at heart, an' as kindly a lad as ye'd wish to meet when he ain't carryin' on. Leave 'im to me. I know *his* ways an' he knows mine, an' no hard feelin's."

So saying, the landlord heaved up a short bench constructed of oak and brought it down with nice calculation on the back of Judson's head.

"Lay hold of his legs there, one o' ye, an' we'll carry 'im up to bed an' tuck 'im in as snug as a mite in a cheese," said Mr. Barley. "He'll be right as wheat in ten or twelve hours. Him an' me understand each other, we do."

What with this and that, Jud remained unconscious of the world, unconscious even of his own existence, until well along in the afternoon. He would have remained in that blissful

state considerably longer but for Major Pottle.

"I must speak to him, drunk or sober," said the major. "This is a matter of importance, Barley," insisted the consequential man.

Barley aroused the sleeper by pouring cold water on his heavy head. Snider sighed and opened his eyes and beheld Major Pottle.

"Attend to me, Snider," said the major. "A gentleman but recently arrived from England—and why the devil he chose this season for his visit beats me! —a wealthy gentleman who may be persuaded to invest in extensive areas of this province if favorably impressed, is ambitious to kill a moose or two at the earliest possible moment. Of course, the wilderness is full of moose—but what a devilish uncomfortable time of year to go looking for them! But he *will* go; and if he fails to find and kill a large bull—several large bulls—he'll think this province is no good as a sporting country and so go elsewhere."

Jud Snider closed his eyes and murmured: "Tell 'im to go to the devil."

"What's that?" cried the major.

"He sez he feels like the devil, sir," said honest Ben Barley. "An' well he may. But he's a good feller at heart, sir, an' a smarter woodsman don't live nor Jud Snider. Wake up, Jud. Major Pottle's talkin' moose to ye!"

He poured more cold water on the woodsman's face and head.

"This is very important, Snider," resumed the land agent, as Jud reraised his heavy lids. "Chancing to hear that you were in town, and knowing that if any man in the province can lead this gentleman to a sure kill, you're the man, I've come straight to you. Can you do it? I may say that he is exceedingly free with his money. Can you lead him to within easy range—sure range—of some big bull moose?"

Then Jud remembered what the wandering half-breed had told him about the signs of a large yard just west of the elbow of Musquash Brook. It hurt him to remember, but he drove his sore brains to the effort in the hope of getting rid of the disturbing major.

"Maybe," he murmured. "How's the weather?"

"Thawin'," the landlord informed him. "Been kind of rainin' all day. South wind."

"Zas all right," muttered the woodsman. "Soon's she stops thawin'—freezes up ag'in—plenty moose." And again he closed his eyes.

"You know where you can find them?" persisted the major. "You are sure of them? Easy shots, mind you."

"To-morrer," sighed Jud.

"He knows, or he wouldn't say so—not to a gentleman like yerself, sir," whispered Barley, drawing the major gently away from the bedside and toward the door. "He'll lead this here friend of yours, this here lord or barrynut, right up to the biggest moose in the country, ye kin lay to that, sir. He's got 'em where he kin lay his hand on 'em, or he wouldn't 'a' spoke as he did. I know 'im. He'll be right as wheat by mornin', sir. All he needs is a bit more sleep—an' then he'll do ye proud, sir."

Major Pottle was so vastly pleased with the result of his visit that he condescended to take a glass of wine with the diplomatic, reassuring taverner. Then he drove off in his cutter to Government House, where the rich and bloodthirsty Sir Peter Crutch was enjoying the hospitality of the governor, and promised the great man better sport and bigger bulls than he dreamed of.

"Leave it all to me, Sir Peter. I'll make up a party. You will honor me with your company, your excellency? Good! Leave everything to me, gentlemen. I'll show Sir Peter that this province can produce something worthy even of his well-known prowess as a mighty hunter. I'll invite Hammer,

whom you met last night, Sir Peter—doctor of the Sixty-second—a keen sportsman. I'll have everything ready for the start the moment this thaw is over—by to-morrow morning, if it freezes to-night. Leave it all to Rowley Pottle."

The wind worked around until, soon after sunset, it blew gently but steadily from the north; and that was the end of that particular thaw. The icy wind died out before sunrise. The sun arose clear and bright in a cloudless sky and struck white fire from a frozen world.

Jud Snider was as bright as the sun that morning. He was early astir, and, after a hearty breakfast, he felt equal to any undertaking and at peace with the whole world. He assured the gentlemen of the party, on his reputation as a woodsman, that he would lead them so close to their intended victims that hair would be singed.

So assured were his mood and manner and words that even Major Pottle did not insist on a definite statement concerning the distance to, and the exact whereabouts of, the fated animals. It was enough for the major to know that the rich baronet was to be favorably impressed by the sporting qualities of the country and would make extensive purchases of wild land in consequence; that he, Rowley Pottle, was about to act as host to what was undoubtedly the most distinguished party of moose hunters that had ever been assembled in the province; that the food and drink and service would prove superior to the provisioning of any expedition of the kind ever before organized at Kingston, and that the sun was shining.

The start was made in two large horse-drawn sleds, in the first of which the four distinguished sportsmen reclined amid hay and blankets and fur robes while the invaluable Snider sat up front beside the driver.

The second sled contained the provisions both dry and wet, the cook, two sturdy fellows to make camp and the teamster. Each sled was set on two pairs of short runners connected by heavy chains. Bobsleds is the name for them in that country. They are the only style for bad roads.

The first stage of the journey was over ten miles of packed but lumpy road which terminated—so far as it served Jud Snider's purpose—at the camp of a crew of choppers. This camp was on Rusty Creek, at a point about four miles to the west of the Waakadoggan and, by Snider's reckoning, not more than ten or twelve miles due south of the moose yard at the elbow of Musquash Brook. That's how Jud figured it, and he knew all that wilderness like the palm of his hand.

"We got to laig it from this here on," he informed Major Pottle.

"How far?" asked the major. "Not far, I hope, for I doubt if Sir Peter has had any experience in traveling on snowshoes."

"We got two toboggans for the grub. Well, he kin ride on one of them, an' we kin tote half the grub on our backs."

"Very true, Snider. Sir Peter will enjoy that, I think. But how far have we yet to go?"

"Ten mile."

"Ten miles! Damn it, Snider, that's too bad! I expected it better of you, Snider. There must be plenty of game nearer hand than that. Ten miles! Outrageous!"

"Now, listen here, major. Didn't ye wake me up an' ax me could I lead yer big friend right up agin' a big bull moose? That's what ye did. 'Yes,' sez I—an' yes it is. I'll lead 'im up to it, an' there'll be more'n one bull for 'im to shoot at. An' what's ten miles in this weather? You got grub enough for to last a week, an' all we got to do's travel easy twixt dinner an' sundown, an' sleep all night, an' commence shootin' after brekfust to-morrer mornin'. What ye cussin' about?"

"But ten miles! Another ten miles up the Waakadoggan—wouldn't that bring us very close to—— What I mean is, where do you expect to find these moose, anyway?"

A derisive smile flickered for an instant in Snider's gray eyes and at the corners of his wide mouth.

"I ain't figgerin' on trackin' up the Waakadoggan," he said. "That would jist about double the distance we got to go, for the 'Doggan makes a big hook to the eastward twixt Rusty an' that settlement of immigrants ya planted up there. We'll travel straight, like a crow flies when he knows where he's goin' to. An' them moose I got all yarded an' waitin' for yer friends ain't within seven mile of them hungry, wild Highlanders."

"Very good, Snider," returned the major hurriedly. "Very good indeed. I just wanted your assurance that Sir Peter and the governor would not be subjected to any unnecessary exposure or fatigue. Thank you, Snider."

The journey was resumed after an elaborate midday meal. One of the teamsters remained at the logging camp in charge of the horses and sleds. All the others of the party, with the single exception of Sir Peter, went forward on snowshoes, with Jud Snider leading the way.

Even Sir Peter made an attempt at snowshoeing, only to realize in five minutes that something more than the intention and powerful legs was required. So he took to the empty toboggan and was pulled along by two of Pottle's men.

The other toboggan, freighted with robes and blankets, firearms and ammunition, food and wines, was drawn by the cook and the remaining teamster. Snider and sturdy Doctor Hammer toted packs. The governor and Major Pottle had just about all they could do comfortably to carry themselves. The crust was strong enough to support the web-footed men and broad toboggans.

The guide called a halt at sundown, selected the site for the encampment, then went forward alone to assure himself of the truth of Baptiste's report. He found the yard, and, after a little cautious scouting, he found signs of its occupancy by both moose and deer. He chuckled at the thought of some of the things that would have happened if his investigation had proved the wandering half-breed to be a liar.

He would not have returned to the camp of distinguished sportsmen in that case, but would have headed northeast and spent the night with his friend Alasdair MacIver, and made the long journey to his solitary cabin next day by way of the river. The patronage of the great meant nothing to him, but his reputation as an expert woodsman meant much. He imagined himself sending a message to Pottle by one of MacIver's Indians—"This will larn ye not to bust in on Judson Snider and wake him up when he needs his sleep," or words to that effect. That would have been a rare good joke on the pompous, grasping land agent. How MacIver would have rejoiced upon hearing of it! He almost found it in his heart to wish that the yard and its occupants had proved to be figments of the half-breed's imagination. Little did he dream that the things which were about to happen under existing conditions would prove even more startling, and more upsetting to Pottle's schemes and pomposity than any might-have-been.

MacIver and his three companions reached the eastward edge of the moose yard in the elbow of Musquash Brook about two hours after sunrise. MacIver hoped to find there a sufficient herd to supply his own household and those of Glenranald with fresh meat for months, with prudent killing and economy.

He felt that it would be his duty to all concerned, should his expectations and the promise of the Malicetes be ful-

filled, to control the inroads on that fortunate, even providential, reserve of food according to his own judgment. He would allow no needless slaughter. He would furnish the improvident folk of Glenranald with venison when they required it, and then only, and he would keep them in ignorance of the source of supply. The instinct to preserve game was strong in him, inherited from many generations of landed proprietors and sportsmen.

They had no more than entered the system of narrow, intersecting trails which constituted the yard, when they were startled by a thumping *bang!* from a hidden point to the south of them. And before any one could express his surprise by word or gesture, three more reports followed the first in ragged but rapid succession.

After a few seconds of stunned inaction, MacIver jumped out of the deep track and headed straight through the dense growths toward what he judged to be the scene of action. The others followed him, Angus MacDonald at full speed and the Malicetes at an easy lope.

True to his promise, Snider had given Major Pottle and his distinguished friends an opportunity to shoot at murderously close range. He had posted the gentleman in the brush beside a deep track and then driven a group of moose past their front. But even so, Sir Peter Crutch, unnerved by his first sight of these high-shouldered and long-headed creatures, had done no more than knock a tuft of hair from the rump of a big bull.

Major Pottle and the governor and Doctor Hammer had all, and each for a reason of his own, let fly at that same fated bull. Pottle and the governor had both done so in the hope that Sir Peter would be fooled into believing one of the hits to be his own—but whereas the governor's action was prompted by politeness, Pottle's was inspired by hope of sales of big areas of wilderness.

Both the second and third shots had registered, but neither had found a vital spot; so Doctor Hammer had fired the fourth and fatal shot for no other reason than to end the sufferings of the moose.

The four gentlemen were standing around the carcass of the big bull when Alasdair MacIver burst upon the scene. All four turned their faces at the sound of that crashing approach. The first face glimpsed by MacIver was that of the fat agent. The Highlander looked no farther at the moment. His blood, already up, went higher. His final leap landed him in the midst of the sportsman, with his wide webs set fairly on a flank of the dead moose.

"You damn thief!" he cried, in unmistakable English.

And then he pushed his open, mittened right hand violently against the agent's flabby face. Pottle staggered backward, fouled the tails of his snowshoes and fell. Sir Peter and the governor grabbed at MacIver, who was an absolute stranger to them and looked exceedingly dangerous. MacIver broke their holds and pushed them roughly away. The opulent baronet tripped and sat down heavily on Pottle. Then two of Pottle's men joined the party from the side lines and Angus MacDonald arrived at the same moment in MacIver's tracks.

"Seize that fellow!" cried the indignant governor.

The cook attempted to obey and was instantly heaved into the deep snow for his trouble. The teamster and MacDonald embraced and fell and rolled all over the dead moose and the helpless Pottle.

"Enough of this!" cried Doctor Hammer, in English. "I know these men, your excellency." He yelled at MacIver, in Gaelic, to behave himself and to pull his friend off the teamster, and MacIver, recognizing the little doctor, put an end to the wrestling. "That

gentleman is the governor, you crazy Highlander," added Hammer.

"Then he's in low company," retorted MacIver. "And I wonder at *you,* my friend—running the woods with this lying, cheating thief of an agent."

"What does he say, Hammer? And what's the language?" asked the governor.

"The language is Gaelic, sir, and he says he's surprised to see gentlemen like ourselves running the woods with Major Pottle, whom he refers to as a liar and a thief."

"Damn the fellow!" cried Pottle. "I've had enough of his insolence, confound him! You saw him assault me, your excellency?"

"I saw him slap your face and heard him call you a damn thief, my dear fellow," returned the governor. "He seems to dislike you. Do you know him?"

Every one was interested now.

Major Pottle glanced around him before answering the great man's question. He saw that the group of which he was the center had been increased by the arrivals of Jud Snider and two Malicetes whom he had employed at one time and another as guides and canoemen.

"I have seen him before," he admitted. "Met him somewhere in the woods, if my memory serves me aright. An ignorant, wild Scotchman, sir. A vagabond of some sort. He should be expelled from the province."

MacIver attracted the governor's attention to himself by doffing his fur cap and making a courtly bow.

"What have you to say for yourself, young man?" asked his excellency.

MacIver turned and spoke rapidly to Doctor Hammer.

"He hasn't much English, sir," said Hammer; "but I know for a fact that he's had a gentleman's education in other branches of learning. His name's MacIver, and he claims kinship with lairds of that name. He asks me to call your excellency's attention to the fact that he struck Major Pottle in the face."

"I noticed that."

"He wants to know if you ever saw a gentleman accept an insult before, sir—a blow and the name of liar?"

"Not from another gentleman, certainly."

"That fellow's a beggarly Highland immigrant!" cried Pottle.

"That's exactly the point," said the doctor. "That's the question. He claims to be of gentle blood; and I know him to be a lad of courage, ability and learning."

"Which is a lie on the face of it!" cried Pottle.

"I *beg* your pardon?" returned the little doctor.

"I mean his claim to gentility, my dear Hammer! I wasn't alluding to your statement concerning his education."

"But what of it?" asked the baronet. "Gentle or simple, why did he push at our good Pottle's face an' call him a liar? Extraordinary!"

"Extraordinary indeed," said the governor. "What is the explanation of it, Pottle?"

"I can explain it to you, sir—quite satisfact—quite a simple explanation, that's to say—in private, sir."

MacIver addressed Doctor Hammer in Gaelic, and Hammer addressed the agent.

"He says he means to do one of two things, Pottle, unless you fulfill the terms of your undertaking with the MacDonalds and Camerons of Glenranald before the last day of this month. He will either meet you, with swords or pistols and me for his second, or he'll go to town and drag you to Government House by the scruff of the neck and horsewhip you in the presence of his excellency."

The agent stared at the doctor, speechless, his flabby face colorless; and every member of the assembled com-

pany, governor and baronet and surgeon, trapper and Highlanders and Indians and servants, stared at *him*. His excellency broke the tingling silence.

"Dueling is against the law," he said sternly. "Horsewhipping is nothing more nor less than assault and battery. Tell your young friend, Hammer, that I sincerely hope that he may not be driven to any act of violence against the person of Major Pottle, and that I shall immediately investigate this matter which seems to be at the root of his trouble—with your assistance, Hammer, as you appear to understand the language. Pottle, if you know the way to these MacDonalds and Camerons, lead us to them without a moment's delay. My curiosity is aroused—and so is Sir Peter's, I think."

Then Pottle moved close to the governor and whispered desperately at him:

"It's nothing, sir—nothing, I assure you. Mere matter of flour an' barley meal—slipped my memory—unworthy of your attention, sir. I'll see to it, sir—a mere detail, sir. But these Highlanders are so suspicious—and excitable. I'll settle it immediately upon my return to town."

"I shall make it my business to see that you do so, Major Pottle," returned the governor—and, though his voice was soft, the look he gave the stout agent was hard and cold. He stepped forward then, withdrew a fur glove and extended his hand to MacIver.

"I don't care a rap for your gentility, and no more for your learning, but you have an honest way with you and a good eye," he said. "Look me up when next you come to town. That's a command, sir. Be so obliging as to translate it to him, Hammer."

MISLEADING EVIDENCE

WHEN Senator Thomas J. Heflin of Alabama, nicknamed "Handsome" by his admiring constituents, was on a visit to Washington last October, the newspaper correspondents called on him to see what he had to say about the outlook for legislation in the coming session of Congress.

"Don't you think, senator, there'll be a substantial reduction in taxes by the Republicans?" a reporter asked him.

"Why should I think that?" returned the Democratic Heflin, who is never moved to enthusiasm by talk in favor of the opposition.

"Because," replied the correspondent, "Mr. Coolidge and some of his cabinet members say they're going to do it."

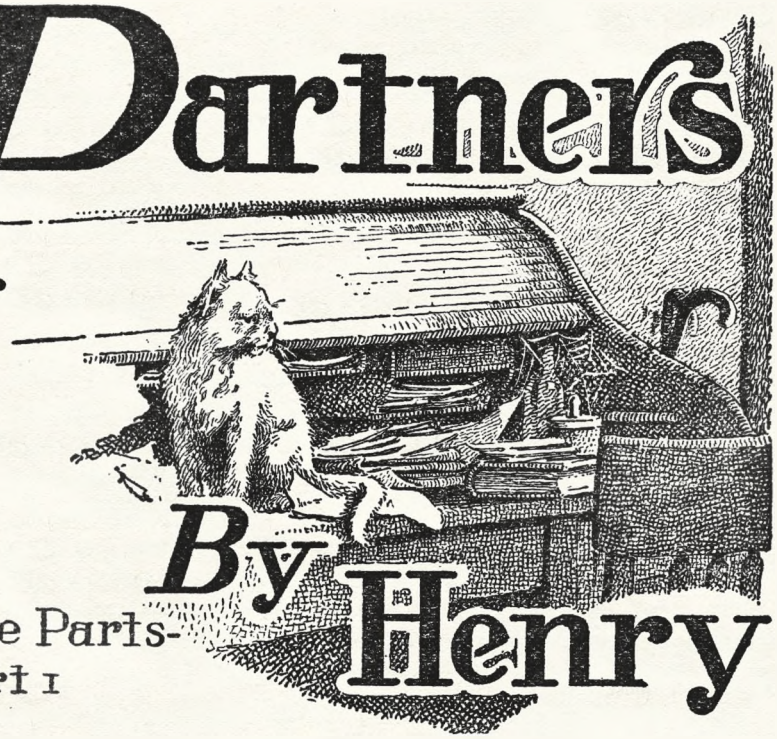
"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," said Heflin, and grinned. "It reminds me. An Irishman, a fine old fellow, got into a day coach on a train down in Alabama and settled himself for a delightful ride. Pretty soon the conductor, coming through to take up the tickets, punched him on the shoulder and said sternly: 'You can't smoke in this car! It's against the rules.'

"'I'm not smokin',' Pat remonstrated, giving him a dirty look.

"'You *are* smoking!' the conductor contradicted. 'You've got your pipe in your mouth this minute!'

"'I have!' the Irishman came back at him contemptuously. 'Yis, I have! And I have me foot in me shoe, too, but I ain't walkin'!'"

Partners



By Henry

In Three Parts—
Part I

Author of "Morningstar and the

Beginning a fine, understanding story of two mining partners. Bill Watson gets Ed Lester starts out on a camping trip. Bill's trip to town turned out a little differ-

CHAPTER I.

A FINE KETTLE OF MUSH!

BILL WATSON didn't like to admit, even to himself, that he was looking for an excuse to go to town. The cabin was well stocked with provisions, and the necessary mine supplies. His partner, Ed, was in good health, he himself was in good health and the two little Spanish mules, Jenny and Johnny, were scandalously fat. There was no need to haul in hay or grain that season. The meadow grass in the mountains above the cabin was exceptionally plentiful. No, there didn't seem to be any necessity for either of the partners going to Quimby.

Yet, Bill wanted to go—had to go. He knew it. And all he had to do was to tell his partner he was going to town and stay a few days; and he knew that Ed Lester would smile and tell him to go ahead and not to forget to fetch back a few newspapers and whatever mail might have arrived. That was the worst of it! Ed was so good-natured and unselfish. Bill, his senior by some ten or eleven years, yearned to look upon the wine when it was red. He had been to Quimby for mail and supplies twice in the past year. He felt exceedingly righteous—and also as though he had been cheated—because on neither occasion had he taken a drink.

The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that he simply had to go to Quimby and get drunk. He had put off his inevitable annual spree long enough. He asked himself why he didn't go to Ed and

Herbert Knibbs

Navajo," "*Thimblerig,*" *Etc.*

mad about next to nothing and goes off to Quimby to spread a little red paint; while ently from what he expected.

say: "Ed, I'm going to town to get saturated;" and then go. But no; he wouldn't do that. He'd cheat himself with some weak excuse to go to Quimby, aware all the time that Ed Lester would see through it. And for no reason in the world, Bill began to hate the sight of his partner, the sound of his voice. Bill grew irritable, cantankerous. Ed noticed, and secretly resented, but made the best of it. Had their relations been a bit more friendly, at the time, Ed would have told Bill to take a vacation and all that it implied.

Bill, coming down the trail from the mine to the cabin, glanced at the lowering sun. It was four o'clock. He had knocked off work a little earlier than usual. It was his turn to cook supper. Ed was still at the mine, timbering. They had had some trouble with the rotten quartz, which, long after a shot, often caved in, threatening injury, even death. Ed would work along for another hour, and then drop down to the cabin. They took turns cooking, and for two years had managed to get along famously.

But, somehow or other, things didn't seem to be going so well, now. Or at least Bill thought so. He admitted to himself that he couldn't mention a specific instance of trouble between them, or even a serious misunderstanding. Ed wasn't the worst cook in the world, and he did more than his share of actual labor in the mine. They were getting out enough ore to make them feel satisfied with the venture. They had the hills pretty well to themselves, and there was game to be had

with but little effort. The cabin was ample for their needs and their comfort. Each had elbow room. In fact, the cabin was almost a camp in itself —with its comfortable veranda; its shed at the rear, for firewood; its kitchen, a separate room off the long, spacious living room, with Bill and his belongings at one end of it and Ed and his few personal effects at the other. No, it was not a case of being huddled together in a den of a cabin, week after week; the sort of thing that sometimes sets the best of men on edge toward each other.

And yet, Bill thought, plodding down the trail, things were not going as they should. Watson was only forty-five years of age; but when he was in town he was sometimes referred to as "Old Bill Watson." He had prospected and mined all his life. His black hair was dusted with silver at the temples. His shoulders were stooped the least bit, his hands knuckled and hard. His gray eyes had a faintly speculative look, as though he were always thinking of something beyond the moment. He had lived much alone. A shrewd observer might have analyzed Bill Watson as stubborn, honest, industrious and kind, but with very little humor in his make-up.

Bill paused as he came to the neatly fenced dooryard, one end of it planted in vegetables. Ed liked to fuss with plants, seemed to have the knack of making them grow. His kitchen garden was doing well. Bill's mood changed. Go to town and get drunk? Not if he knew it! The last time—nearly two years ago, come to think of it—he had fallen off the buckboard and injured his shoulder so that he was unable to work for two weeks. Something always happened when he toyed with alcohol. No! He simply would forget all about it, trot into the cabin, cook supper, light his pipe and chat while Ed washed the dishes.

Bill was in no hurry to go in. He was a few minutes ahead of time, according to his schedule. Moreover, the garden truck and the cabin, the rail fence, the clean dooryard, made an attractive picture. Not many miner's cabins were as large and comfortable and neat! And Ed was responsible for a lot of it. He wasn't what you'd call a mining man by profession, or even by instinct. Ed was a horseman. Just look at Johnny and Jenny! They were not horses—just mules. But *such* mules, since Ed had fetched them there some two years back. Sleek, fat, saucy —as handsome a team of mules, for their inches, as ever ditched a buckboard! No, Ed wasn't what you'd call a mining man, but he was a wonderfully good mechanic, and mighty quick to learn. Fenced the cabin yard because he wanted to raise vegetables. Had to fence it because the deer came down at night and ate his first crop. Built a new corral and lean-to stable for the mules. Built the woodshed, which was mighty handy, too; especially in winter. Ed was always inventing some new convenience or comfort.

Bill unlatched the gate and crossed the dooryard. The gate swung to with a crisp click and latched itself. Another of Ed's wrinkles. You simply couldn't leave the gate standing open. Bill congratulated himself upon having such a partner. Queer thing, too. Fate had arranged that, not the two men. Bill paused with his hand on the door latch. "By gum! If I hadn't gone to Los Angeles and got lit up, that time, I'd never met Ed! Even if I did have to fall downstairs and sprain my knee j'int to meet him—it was worth it!"

This was somewhat of a poser. Bill had always complained to himself that, when he departed from the paths of rectitude, something happened—something unpleasant. Yet his chance meet-

ing with Ed Lester had been the most fortunate happening in his entire career. Might as well credit liquor with having brought that about, anyway.

He thrust the door open, hung his hat on one of the pegs near the doorway, clumped over to the kitchen and washed his hands and face. Coarse, clean roller-towel; right handy! Also Ed's idea. Big looking-glass, and clear. A man could see to shave in that glass. The old glass made a fellow look as though his head had been squeezed between the bumpers of a freight train. Ed's was mighty neat and tidy; no mistake about it. And he wasn't half bad as a cook. But he didn't take cooking as seriously as he did some of the other work.

Bill made a fire in the stove, searched among the pots and pans for a kettle, in which he intended to make a rich and soul-satisfying mulligan. Ed always liked that kind of a stew. Having given up his idea of going to town, Bill felt righteous, and generously inclined. He poked around, and finally found the kettle back of the stove. He hauled it up, peered into it, took it to the back door and looked into it again. He cursed, softly and fervently. With a heavy spoon he thumped the interior of the kettle.

"Mush!" he exclaimed. "He's gone and let that mush burn onto this here pot; and nothing this side of a diamond drill will touch it! The damn ijit! That's right! We had mush for supper last night, and instead of soaking this pot he lets her stand on the stove until she plated with mush. It would be easier to crack the pot off the mush and use the mush for a pot, than to try to blast it out."

Bill thumped and gouged. He even went so far as to get an old rasp and try to scrape the burned mush out with the point. Finally, cursing a blue streak, he flung the pot back of the stove.

"Job for a stone mason, or somebody in a lunatic asylum!" he growled.

And straightway, he fried some bacon and eggs, and made some coffee. Devouring a hasty meal, he cleaned the dishes, and left the stove as bare of all evidence of supper as the surface of an ice rink. Any man that would let mush burn on a kettle, in the first place; and any man that would let a kettle stand overnight with burned mush in it——! Bill was miles beyond profanity. He was all but breathless. Righteousness fled from him. Virtue departed for the wilderness. Generosity faded from the horizon. Something hot glowed at the pit of his stomach. He knew it was not caused by bacon or eggs or coffee or biscuits. It was just a feeling, a realization that *now* he *knew* he was going to Quimby and get drunk. Fate had ordained it—Fate and burned mush.

CHAPTER II.

TWO HIT OUT ON SEPARATE PATHS.

BILL was seated on the edge of his bunk, smoking his after-supper pipe, when Ed sauntered in, whistling. Ed washed, glanced at the potless stove and the plateless table, and at Bill. It was Bill's turn to cook, but there he sat, smoking his pipe. And he never smoked until after he had eaten supper. As Bill offered no explanation of the break in their domestic schedule, Ed sat down at his end of the cabin and filled and lighted *his* pipe. He would give Bill time to get over his streak of peevishness, or whatever ailed him. But half an hour seemed long enough. And as Bill hadn't spoken, Ed got up, thrust a stick of wood into the stove and good-naturedly asked Bill what he would like for supper.

"Had mine," growled Bill. "You can get what you like for yourself."

Ed recognized the tone and the man-

ner as indicating extreme disgust. Evidently Bill was off his feed. The old boy really ought to go to town and loosen up a bit. Do him good. Ed puttered round the stove, heated some biscuits, fried bacon and made coffee. When he had finished eating supper, he gathered the plates and utensils together to wash them. He remembered having left the unwashed mush kettle on the back of the stove, last evening. He had intended washing it, but Bill had been discussing horses with him and the discussion had grown into an argument, wherein the kettle was overlooked. And now Ed could not find the kettle.

"Seen anything of the mush kettle?" he asked.

Bill took his pipe from his mouth with the cold deliberation of an experienced duelist about to teach an impudent young blade good manners. Bill was quite an expert at talking round his pipe stem, but the present occasion called for faultless diction.

"Did I see our mush kettle? *Did* I? Yes, I seen it! I seen it settin' on the back of the stove with the mush burned onto it so tight you couldn't get it off with a cold chisel. And I didn't aim to ruin no cold chisel nor no ax, tryin'. What was you doin'? Did you think you was linin' a cupola with fire clay? Or did you just let it burn that away through ign'ance? Yes, I seen the damn kettle. It's back of the stove, where I thrun it. If the door had been open I would of thrun it farther."

"Sorry I wasn't here to open the door for you," said Ed, smiling to himself.

"It's a good thing you *wasn't* here!" declared Bill, reinstating his pipe.

Ed whistled, hummed a tune, washed the cooking things and, after lighting a lamp, went to work to remove the tenacious lining of burned mush from the kettle. He chipped and scoured and hammered and scraped, whistling cheerily. Bill, dour as a mud turtle in captivity, and in fact not unlike one, as he sat with his arms folded, his head down between his shoulders, glared across the cabin at Ed's cheerful industry. Bill's attitude did not invite conversation; yet he disliked to be ignored. Presently, while Ed scraped and scoured, Bill undressed and went to bed. Bill's snoring offset Ed's scraping. It wasn't exactly competition, but it sounded like it.

The mountain stars were cold and clear and bright, the mountain air crisp, when Ed stepped out and sauntered over to the corral, to see that Jenny and Johnny were all right. The little Spanish mules nosed his hand, poking their heads over the top pole. A professional horseman, Ed Lester was not specially demonstrative to animals, but he was just and kind in handling them, which is far better than sugar and petting. The mules were exceedingly fond of Ed. They would follow him, if allowed their freedom; and in harness they obeyed him as though they liked to do so.

Recalling Bill's explosive disgust, Ed Lester smiled, shrugged his broad shoulders. Bill would get over it. It wasn't just a case of mush-lined kettle, either. Bill had been snooping around for some time, looking for an excuse to explode. Well, he had exploded. He'd be a regular white man, in the morning. And with this thought in mind Ed returned to the cabin and went to bed. He had worked hard that day and he slept hard. In fact, when Bill rose about three in the morning, Ed was so thoroughly asleep that he scarcely heard him. An hour later when Ed did wake up, he vaguely recalled having heard Bill stirring around some time during the night.

Ed found the kitchen stove hot, and other evidence that Bill had had his breakfast. Ed thought that breakfast

was not a bad idea. He made coffee, and did not spare the bacon or the eggs. They were coming to the end of their egg supply—eggs tallowed and "laid down" in their hillside cellar. But recently Bill had suggested that if they didn't catch up on the old eggs and get in some new ones, there would be a decided loss in stock on hand. Ed cleaned up the kitchen and, making sure that he had tobacco, dropped the latch and strode up the trail toward the mine.

Opposite the corral he stopped suddenly. The gate was open, the buckboard was gone, and Jenny and Johnny had vanished. "Two and one make three," he murmured, and then added, —"mules." Bill, without a word, had hitched up and driven to town. There were two or three things Ed would have wished him to get while in Quimby. But, shucks! They weren't so important. So Bill had tried to saddle his excuse for acting like a half-baked school kid on an unwashed mush-kettle? He hoped Bill would not get so drunk he would forget to take care of the mules. Ed knew that Bill could never get so drunk but that the mules would take good care of him, especially if he were in the buckboard and they were homeward bound. They would come home, most of the way at a walk. Ed believed that the mules, Johnny and Jenny actually conversed, when in team and walking over the hills. In fact he had seen Jenny call Johnny's attention to a choice bit of scenery, more than once. And if Johnny didn't happen to get her first vibration, she promptly nipped him. Yes, the mules would take care of Bill, take better care of him than he deserved, if he was foolish enough to get saturated

"I suppose Bill thinks I'm going to keep right on shoring up that damn hole in the hill, while he's away," said Ed, leaning on the corral bars and gazing at the empty feed rack. "Or maybe he thinks I'm going to weep and moan till he comes back. Then, again, he may not think at all. He doesn't, as a rule."

Quite contrary to what Bill surmised would happen when Ed found that he had left without explanation, Ed began to whistle "Turkey in the Straw," which, at any tempo, cannot exactly be called a dirge. There was a twinkle in his blue eyes, and a lilt to his step as he strode about, first putting up the corral bars, then picking up the two halters—Bill always left them on the ground—and carrying them to the house. Here, Ed went to work with a sprightly swing that would not have flattered Bill's egotism. He changed from his worn and patched overalls to a pair of heavy woolen trousers. He lined his brogans neatly against the wall and pulled on a pair of high-laced boots. From his trunk he took a thick soft-flannel shirt, the best garment in the world for every kind of weather. He pulled the shirt on, and belted on a compact-looking automatic pistol. He discarded his old, black, torn, felt hat and donned a newer Stetson.

Then he made up his pack; a couple of clean bandannas, two pairs of heavy wool socks, a book of trout flies, and a reel, a box of cartridges, a supply of matches in a small, flat tin can, two packages of smoking tobacco, some horse blanket safety pins, half a side of bacon in a canvas bag, a can of coffee, some sugar and salt, a couple of packages of self-rising pancake flour, a heavy tin cup and a tin plate, with knife and fork and spoon. All told, this was a light pack, sorted and laid on an army blanket, and not rolled, but made flat. One of Ed Lester's choicest possessions was a light balloon-silk pup tent, which weighed but eight pounds, and which, because of its superior quality, cost about as much. Bill Watson had scoffed at it as a new-fangled contraption that only a

tenderfoot would monkey with. A tarp was good enough for him. But Ed believed in using something better than good enough, if you could afford it.

With the little tent as the actual cover to his pack, a tough, waterproof cover that could be used as a tarp, or as a tent, and the pack in a light pack harness of his own contriving, Ed was equipped for a two-weeks cruise in the hills. He could get more flour at Burden's cabin, if he needed it. And always he could pick off a grouse or two with the automatic. Then there would be trout, more than enough. In fact the fishing was what Ed enjoyed most. And the last thing he did before leaving the cabin was to inspect the little trunk rod, and tie it to the pack. Going out through the kitchen to the woodshed, he took a light half-ax in its sheath and shoulder strap, and after glancing regretfully at his garden patch, he turned his back on cabins and Bill Watson, mines and mining, vegetable gardens, burned mush kettles, and all the incidentals to human companionship.

He struck on up the hill trail back of the cabin to enjoy the first vacation he had had in two years. Yet, it was in no spirit of revenge or spite that he set out for the mountains. If his absence would have endangered their prospects, their home, or in any way affected their sound friendship—and in spite of Bill's occasional flare-ups, Ed felt that it was sound—Ed would have been the last man in the world to have gone on a vacation. But Bill had traipsed off like a fussy and mad old woman, the mules were where they would be fed, the mine wouldn't walk off and get lost. The cabin wouldn't burn up of itself, and Bill wouldn't die of heart failure if he did come back and find his partner gone. Ed's one regret was the vegetable patch. It would need attention.

But always one must give hostages to fortune. Ed gave his, cheerfully—the vegetables that he had tended so carefully and was so proud of. He didn't intend that anything should spoil his first vacation in two years. And it was mighty good to get away from the stuffy work in the mine, the smell of powder and powder smoke, the damp, the back-breaking work with pick and drill and sledge. Ed climbed the hill trail, grinned like a truant schoolboy.

"I've pushed that old wheelbarrow from the mine to the dump and back, times enough to have traveled twice around the world," he soliloquized. "And I haven't been anywhere—just trotting up and down the canyon, from the cabin to the mine—for two years. Shucks! It's time I hopped the bars and high-tailed it. If old Bill comes back and I'm not there, it will do him good to do a little worrying. He was getting just a little high-handed, but I guess it was his stomach. 'When you hear the liquor callin' you don't heed nothin' else,' as Bob used to say."

Far up the trail, Ed turned to look down at the cabin below, the canyon leading toward the mine, the tumbling foothills beyond, and the thread of road that ran south and vanished in the haze of the mesa land. He was in high spirits, elated, full of vigor. He lacked but two things to make the vacation complete: a good saddle animal, used to the hills; and a pack horse. But that would be making a feature of the vacation.

No, it was better as it was—no fuss or planning or talk; just pick up your ax and rod and a few doo-dabs and hit for the top of the range. Over the range was a trout stream—a wild, noisy, white-chested trout stream, with some interesting pools in the valley below, and some mighty lively trout in the quick water above. And back there, in that silent country where your own footsteps were cush-

ioned so you couldn't hear yourself walking, the grouse sat close to the tree trunks and blinked at you stupidly. You could knock them off their perches with a stone. Then there were the tracks of mountain lion, and not infrequently of a silver-tip—and deer and bobcat. Farther back in the hills a fellow could occasionally see a mountain sheep, up there where the timber stopped and the crags and rock showed streaks of snow, even in July.

But best of all was the feeling of absolute freedom from routine, freedom from all obligation to another human, leisure to think—or not think, if you didn't want to. Then there was the chance of a visit to Burden's cabin —Burden, the old mountain man, who trapped, panned a little gold; and who made but one trip a year to town. The old trapper always had meat, fresh or jerked. And he was good company, with his quaint talk and his easy silences. Ed Lester turned from gazing at the cabin and breasted the slope. He was a tall, well-put-up young fellow, reflecting, in his keen face and stride, his joy in life. Rather a strange partner for the taciturn, oldish-young Bill Watson. But that fact leads to another story, a story of town, and a fall down a flight of hotel stairs.

The declining sun shot golden arrows across the peaks and among the blue pines and spruce. Ed paused occasionally to glance around and take a long breath. He was better than halfway up the mountain, going in the twilight of the dense timber. When he reached the crest the twilight would disappear, giving place to the keen light of the high country—a light that would last long enough for him to make a cast or two in the trout stream, pitch his tent, and cook supper. Then for a smoke and the companionship of a little fire.

And sunset found him over the crest, camped a few yards back from the mountain stream—if you were too close it was so noisy you couldn't think—in a small opening among seedling pines. Ed had his fire going, a grouse cleaned and spitted above the low flames, and was cleaning three or four trout at the stream. His blanket was spread beneath the tent on a floor of light browse. On a flat rock near the fire lay his pipe and tobacco. A water ouzel swooped past him, upstream, twittering through the spray. The tiny bird alighted on a wet, black rock, round which the torrent swelled and rushed like an incoming tide. Ed could barely hear the faint note of the ouzel's plaint. Ed grinned.

"Be careful, little fellow, or you'll get your feet wet."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHAIR THAT SLIPPED.

WITH twenty long, uninhabited miles ahead of him, Bill Watson had plenty of time to think. Upon leaving the cabin, in the darkness of early morning, he had been more or less occupied in keeping Jenny and Johnny in the road. It was quite evident that they didn't see any sense in starting out for Quimby at that hour. Moreover, they had been loafing for a month or two, and they were fat and frisky. But once the sun was up, and the long shadows of the foothill ridges were streaking across the plain below, the mules settled down to a decent trot, and Bill had time to think. The worst of it was he didn't want to think. If he thought of Quimby and its liquid possibilities, it made him thirsty and restless. If he thought of Ed, the mine, and the cabin, it made him ashamed of himself. He told himself that he could turn back and drive home. There was nothing in the world to hinder him doing that. But he had started for Quimby, and he'd be dinged and otherwise mutilated if he'd turn back. Look

like a damn fool, pulling up to the cabin about the time Ed was eating breakfast. No, he'd put it through—give Ed a chance to realize what it meant to operate the mine alone and cook his own meals every day. Give him a chance to miss him. That was what Ed needed. Any man that would let mush burn on a kettle and then let it stand!

Jenny and Johnny seemed to know that their driver was moralizing; for they slackened their trot and, with ears bobbing, plodded along, until Bill woke up to the fact, and clucked to them. They had not anticipated the cluck, and their reaction was so prompt it snapped Bill's head back and gave him what he called a crick in the neck. He steadied them down, and tried not to think. But he couldn't help doing so. He tried to concentrate on the journey and the old familiar landmarks; but that grew monotonous, and he caught himself thinking again. It made him mad; instead of enjoying his vacation and the anticipation of drowning all thought in the flowing beaker, he was crabbing along like a snapping turtle trying to bite itself. Mighty nice day, too. Not too warm, even down on the flats. Funny how a man began to notice the weather, when he began to get old. But heck! Forty-five wasn't old. It was how you felt inside. So Bill had heard. He asked himself how he felt inside, and the only answer he could evoke from the inner depths was, "Dry!"

Dog-gone that crick in the neck! Bill twisted his head round trying to limber it.

"Suppose I'll have that all through my vacation. Spoil everything. Rub it with Mustang Liniment to-night, though. Or whisky. Mebbe whisky would be better—work faster. Mebbe one of them bones in my neck has slipped sideways. Wonder why a fella couldn't be made so his bones wouldn't slip, or jump out of joint, or get to wabbling around, when he made some little move that his dog-gone bones wasn't expecting? Too much machinery to a human, anyway. Too many parts to him. He coulda been made a whole lot simpler—and cheaper. Now take his stomach, for instance, and his alimony canal, as they call it: awful lot of waste hose in that—all twisted up and getting nowhere. And a cow—three stomachs! Awful lot of waste! And look at the chances she runs, if she was to get the bellyache."

This thought led to other speculations about the human anatomy and its pecularities. Bill grew sleepy as the sun warmed his back. Queer—when he was working in the mine he never grew sleepy. But now he didn't have a thing to do but enjoy himself, but could hardly keep awake. And only half way to Quimby!

Dog-gone it, he didn't care a hang whether he got to Quimby or not. Nothing to it. Get in town, put up the team, say hello to two or three old saloon-front blisters, get a drink, go and get the mail and a few knick-knacks; then get a drink, and go over and have a talk with Al Jones at the livery—which would mean a drink. And then go over to the barber shop and get a haircut, and have a talk with Johnny Metz the barber. If trade wasn't too brisk Johnny would leave the barber shop and they would go over and have a drink. Bill could almost taste that last one.

After that he'd have to call on old man Hartman of The Hartman Mercantile Co., and pay him a little on his bill, and mebbe get a few small supplies. And if old man Hartman was feeling pretty good he would say that they had better step in the back room—*another* drink. But you bet old man Hartman never spent a dime over the bar. Kept his own private stock and saved saloon profits.

Bill didn't know just what might happen after that last drink. His imagination began to splutter and finally ran out of gas. But whatever happened, it would be the same old thing—anticipation, saturation, demoralization. And the getting over it was the worst! Couldn't look a decent looking glass in the eye for a week. And, dog-gone it, it cost money! Not at first, when every fellow you treated bought also, or most of them did. But after you got started, and your mine got to making you a couple of million a year—six drinks would do it—why, you just bought for anybody that came along, and wished they'd keep coming along so fast you wouldn't have a chance to quit for two or three days. And then you'd just simply have to start in on black coffee and remorse, to get back to earth again.

Bill shook his head. He saw both sides of the picture. But he couldn't turn back any more than he could have apologized to Ed for having got sour and left without a word. It just couldn't be done. Only time and a strong constitution could solve the problem.

More than two thirds of the way to Quimby, now. Just passed the old adobe ruin. The mules pricked their long ears, made a more uniform effort to trot. Bill's short, curly beard twitched in the breeze. The brim of his hat laid back against the crown, giving him a kind of wild and dangerous look, or an adventurous look, like "He's One of the Bravest" going to a fire on the high seat of the nickel-and-red fire-engine.

But in spite of his appearance, Bill didn't feel wild or dangerous—or even adventurous. He felt little and mean and human. He was a skunk, but he hated to say the word, even to himself. He hadn't treated Ed right, this last flop of the box. But by gravy, when he did get back to the mine, he'd make it up to Ed—you bet! He'd tell Ed to hook up the team and take a vacation and stay away as long as he liked. Why, a fellow ought to overlook a burned mush kettle, or just push it to the back of the stove for the other fellow to dig out. Anybody might forget and do that. Bill forgave Ed for having left the kettle in such a condition, even if it had been plain that Ed had done it on purpose—left the danged kettle for his partner to wash. The nearer Bill came to Quimby, the easier it became for him to forgive any one anything. His magnanimity increased in inverse ratio to the mileage tween himself and the Bennett House bar.

So did his thirst. He was now glad he had come to Quimby. Darn nice little town, with its cottonwoods and its sidewalk, and the store, and the hotel. And you could always loaf in the livery office, especially if you put up your team there, and didn't just stake 'em out and feed 'em yourself—like you ought to do, and save money. Anyhow, you might as well do it in proper style. A fellow didn't come to town to get drunk every day. Bill didn't, anyway.

And because Bill Watson had complimented Quimby in his meandering soliloquy, he felt vaguely disappointed that Quimby did not take notice of his arrival with something more than a casual nod or an indifferent, "'Lo, Bill! Your mules are lookin' good." But that was about all the welcome he got. Speaking dogmatically, Quimby didn't even wag its tail to welcome Bill Watson's arrival. Quimby snoozed with its dusty nose on its dusty paws. Didn't the town know that Bill Watson intended to open a can of red paint?

Thrice, ere he reached the harbor of the livery, citizens recognized him with something like a greeting: "'Lo, Bill! Your mules are lookin' good." Dog-

gone it! Had the whole town become mule fanciers? Bill might have felt more pleased at the greeting had he been a horseman. But he was not. He was a mining man. Mules were but a means of locomotion or freightage. Bill attempted to return the compliment in kind to the third citizen who recognized him and mentioned the mules. Bill pulled up the mules, nodded, and gazing pointedly at a scurvy mongrel snoozing in the street, said:

"How, Steve! Your dog is getting right handsome! Real up to date and pretty—oh, yes!"

But the dog didn't belong to Steve. The attempted riposte went wild. Bill chewed hard on nothing, and clucked to the mules. Quimby didn't seem to pay much attention to him, just then. But by gum! he'd make the town sit up and take notice! He'd make Quimby sit up on its haunches and howl to the moon, before he got through! Did anybody think he was going to spend good money for bad liquor and get nothing else in return? No, sir! He was going to make every dollar count. He'd make 'em forget mules, and pay attention to him!

Al Jones, the liveryman, had a watch chain made of nuggets, from which depended a golden horseshoe. He owned the biggest mustache and eyebrows in captivity. His cheeks were clean shaven, and his head had been for many years as bald as a pumpkin —and redder, if anything. Al sported the horseshoe watch chain because he was in the livery business. It was the proper thing. But he needn't have done so. His mustache alone was worth the price of admission, any day. A stranger, entering Quimby and inquiring for the liveryman was always directed to look for the big, red-faced man with the large mustache and the horseshoe. But no one could have mistaken him for anything other than a horse dealer. He walked horsey, talked horsey, wore his big, gray Stetson at a horsey angle, and smelled horsey.

His only competitor in artistic advertising was Frank Bair, the butcher. Frank had been to Chicago once. While there he purchased a tie pin—a miniature gold meat cleaver with a chip diamond set in the middle of the blade. Frank was the only man in the county who wore a white collar and a necktie while at work. But he felt that he had to—as a background for the cleaver.

Al Jones' greeting to Bill Watson had a bit of warmth in it. Al surmised that Bill, who hadn't been in town for months, was there for a purpose; and that if he once got properly started, it would mean much convivality and a nice board-bill for the team of mules. Al was a diplomat. All horsemen are, though you may not believe it.

" 'Lo, Bill," he growled in his basso profundo, his beetling eyebrows and huge mustache concealing anything like a facial expression. " 'Lo, Bill, ole terrapin! Say, you're lookin' fine! In on business, or just a little pleasure trip?"

Bill felt a glow of companionship pervade his being. Al had not even mentioned the mules; had scarcely looked at them as he unhooked them and led them in.

They were in the livery office—a ten-by-ten room, dusty, and cluttered with salvage from various sources. The roll-top desk was burdened with catalogues, ancient calendars that blandly belied the month, a dry inkstand, bills, letters, and a few bottles of horse medicine. The swivel chair, a sketchy affair that tipped any one of a thousand ways, according to your sense of equilibrium, behaved only when ridden by Al himself, in person, as the theater bills say. It was what a horseman might justly call a

one-man chair, subject only to the control of its owner.

The desk, then, the chair, a sample horse-collar, an unopened packing case, a pot-bellied stove, a washing machine attached by Al because the agent owed him a bill, some grimy books on veterinary practice, a dirty window, a highly colored—but also slightly dusty—lithograph of a lady in pale-blue tights, a cobwebbed ceiling—these were the chief features of the office.

When Al wished to exhibit his best social manners he always offered the prospective customer a seat in the swivel chair. "Set down!" Al would growl, his fierce, wide eyebrows working, as he reached in his vest pocket and produced a stiff cigar and proffered it with ponderous courtesy. The wise ones declined both, and if they sat, it was on the rickety single bed, or the packing case. "Set down!" was what Al growled to Bill Watson, and Bill accepted the invitation, because he felt entitled to all the social attention and preference at Al's disposal, considering their business relations. Bill sat down. The swivel chair happened to be on a dead center; felt secure and stable. Bill glanced up coyly at Al, who stood with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, gazing down upon Bill.

"Al," said Bill in a husky, confidential tone, "I'm goin' to get drunk!"

Al's heavy eyebrows lifted in simulated surprise. He was not unwilling to share in the orgy, at Bill's expense. But it wouldn't do to appear too willing.

"Been on the wagon six months, myself," Al rumbled. "If it wasn't for my business, I'd join you. That I would!"

"Are you real rushed, Al?" queried Bill, almost plaintively. He longed for the companionship of a convivial soul, while on the great adventure. "Are you real rushed, right now?"

"Well——" Al hesitated, stepped out into the runway and glanced up and down the stable. "I got one team goin' out at four thirty, and the gray at five. And I'm expectin' that picture-frame agent from Weldsburg back most any time. Ain't exactly rushed, but business is business."

Bill was not somehow, especially impressed by Al's hesitancy, or his volume of business.

"Suit yourself, Al," he said, finally. "Guess I'll leave my gun here, if you don't mind."

This of course, seemed quite proper.

"Sure, old-timer! Just put her there on my desk and I'll lock her up in the safe, this evening."

"Guess I'll unload her, likewise," said Bill. "Last time I left my gun in somebody's keepin'—I was over to 'Lite' Fowlers' on the Redbank—Lite took my gun and laid it on the dresser in the bedroom. Mis' Fowler come along in, a while after, and found the baby settin' on the floor peekin' down the barrel of that gun—and it at full cock. You can't tell who'll git to monkeyin' with a loaded gun."

"Plumb judgmentical!" asserted Al. "You always did have good hoss sense."

Bill sported no fancy belt and holster. When he traveled, he stuck the short-bareled .45 in the waistband of his trousers. To-day he had on both a vest and coat. Bill pulled the gun from its concealment, half-cocking it, and was about to kick the cartridges out when the swivel chair, owing to some slight variation in Bill's position, tipped back with a rusty screech. Just what happened, Al never knew. The gun exploded.

With a wild yell, Bill Watson leaped from the swivel chair and danced around on one foot. The other was clasped in his hands. Al had disappeared. He came back, however, his fierce eyebrows working vigorously.

"What'n hell you trying to do?" he rumbled. "Shoot up your friends?"

Bill paid no attention. He sat down on the floor, still clasping his foot as though it were a precious treasure.

"What'd you do?" queried Al again, a bit relieved. He had left suddenly, thinking that Bill had, perhaps, gone loco.

"Al, I'm shot!" declared Bill.

"Honest?"

"Damn you! Yes, honest! Git a doctor, quick!"

"Le' me look," said Al.

"I tell you I'm shot," cried Bill. "Feel's like I blowed my foot plumb off. Git the doc, you wabble-eyed fool!"

Al's nerve was returning.

"Now take it easy, Bill. I'll send for the doc. You set still, and don't touch that gun again."

Al strode to the door, waved to Louis Bennett, the saloon keeper across the way.

"Hey, Louie! Send somebody for Doc Ripley. Bill Watson's done shot hisself."

"Hell, no!" called Louie. "What did he do that for?"

Louie didn't hesitate long. Excitement would boom trade. If Old Bill Watson had plugged himself, it would mean big business for the bar. Louie dispatched a courier to Doctor Ripley's house.

Al returned to the scene of the disaster. Bill was unlacing his shoe, meanwhile swearing with splendid abandon. His animus seemed to focus chiefly on the swivel chair.

"The damn bear trap bucked, just as I was goin' to punch a ca'tridge out," he declared. "Thrun me back—and you see what happened!"

"Too bad," murmured Al soothingly.

"Sure spoiled my fun," said Bill.

He lighted a cigar and condoled with Bill.

Doctor Ripley, a short, stout, round-faced and genial person, some sixty years of age, pattered in. He stripped off Bill's sock and examined the wound. The bullet had drilled a clean hole between the cords of the second and the great toes; a painful but not necessarily serious wound.

Bill was beginning to feel a trifle wabbly. He argued against the doctor's suggestion that he be carried across the street and up to the Quimby Hotel. Bill said he could walk, with a little help.

"All right. Try it!" said the round-faced doctor, cheerily.

Louie Bennett had come in—Johnny Metz, the barber; Jack Somers, the stableman; and Frank Bair, the butcher. The news had spread like berry juice on a white tablecloth. There were many offers of help. Louie Bennett gave Bill a hand up. Bill took a step, wabbled, and gave in.

"He's done fainted!" said Louie.

"Knew he would," said Doctor Ripley. "Now some of you boys tote him over to Mis' Ryerson's place. She's got clean beds, and it's quiet. I'll come along and talk to her."

CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING IS COMING OVER BILL.

BILL WATSON didn't know how he got there, but there he was. And his foot was there—a huge hummock under the clean, white bedspread. Some one was in the room. It was Doctor Ripley, washing his hands in a shiny white porcelain basin, his back toward the bed. A gentle breeze tugged at the window curtains, which were white and clean—mighty fresh looking and neat. Bill felt comfortable. Only a vague uneasiness teased his memory. Something had happened. Had the mules run away with him and ditched him? No. He remembered driving into Quimby, stopping at the livery—Al Jones' eyebrows—— Now he had it!

Was sitting in that man-killing swivel chair unloading his gun, and *wham!*

Doctor Ripley turned his head.

"How do you feel, Bill?"

"How did I get here, doc?"

"Boys toted you over. How do you feel?"

"I ain't started to feel, yet."

Bill saw the doctor put a shiny steel instrument in his bag. Followed a bandage roll. Bill sniffed.

"Say, doc! Did you have to amputate?"

Doctor Ripley suppressed a smile and gazed sternly at Bill over his steel-rimmed glasses. "Not yet. But you'll have to stay here a few days, and keep quiet. If inflammation sets in—well, it's up to you."

"This is Mis' Ryerson's, ain't it?"

"Yes. And you're lucky to be here. I've told Mrs. Ryerson what to do. And she's your boss. I'll drop in this evening and see how you're making it."

Bill's eyes grew big.

"But, doc! You mean Mis' Ryerson's going to be the nurse—same as a hospital?"

"That's the idea. She'll give you your medicine; and I've asked her to take your temperature at six. She's not a professional nurse, but she understands a clinical thermometer. She nursed her husband, before he died. Now you——"

Bill raised on his elbow. A twinge shot up his leg, and he lay back muttering profanity.

"Don't go yet, doc. I wanted to ask—— Say!—about taking my temperature—how does she do it?"

"Now don't get excited, Bill, or I'll have to give you something to put you to sleep. Mrs. Ryerson has kindly offered to take care of you till you're on your feet again. Just do as she says, and I'll drop in about eight and see how you are."

"Say, doc, kin I have a drink—just about three fingers?"

"Certainly!" Doctor Ripley filled the washstand tumbler from the shiny-white pitcher. "Drink all you want. It'll do you good."

Bill took the tumbler and drank, shook his head and lay back on the pillows.

"That's all right, doc. But how's a man going to keep up his nerve on that stuff?"

"Keep up your nerve? Bill, you're worse than an old woman! If you needed liquor, I'd give it to you. But if I hear of any of the boys fetching liquor to you, I'll"—Doctor Ripley paused; stared hard at Bill—"I'll tell Mrs. Ryerson."

"That's all right, doc; but wait a minute——"

But Doctor Ripley grabbed up his bag and was gone.

Bill stared at the closed door. Doc Ripley was gone. And the next to open that door would be a woman—Mary Ryerson, who ran the Quimby Hotel—no meals served; simply rooms for boarders—noted for its clean rooms and beds and its efficient management. A mighty nice woman. Everybody liked and respected her. But a woman was a woman, and Bill stood in awe of the sex. Mrs. Ryerson had smooth, brown hair and gray eyes, and was youngish-looking, even if she was a widow. Most widows looked kind of run down and had a little age on 'em. But not Mary Ryerson. If she was only a man, now—a man like Doc Ripley, or even Al Jones—it wouldn't be so bad. But for a woman to spoon-feed you, and give you medicine and take your temperature! Lord!

Bill relaxed and gazed at the ceiling. He realized his helplessness, and the realization made him mad. He reviled himself bitterly for having come to Quimby for the sole purpose of getting liquored up. He hadn't even had the excuse of provisions or mail or mining supplies. Well, it served him

right! He ought to have known better. Every time he went on a spree, something happened. Good thing he hadn't gone on many. Hitherto, the something that had happened, had happened when he was well along the highway of hilarity. But this time he hadn't even had the satisfaction of getting started. Plugged himself when he was cold sober! And he had packed a gun all his life. Dang that wabble-kneed contraption miscalled a chair! He hoped it would pitch some day, unexpectedly, and break Al Jones' neck!

The pattern of the wall paper became dim. The light was slowly fading. The mirror over the dresser, tilted forward, reflected a whitish surface on which a dark blur showed—Bill's head. Bill raised his arm and moved it. A ghostly arm moved in the mirror. Bill could smell a faint fragrance. Coffee! Somebody was getting supper. A wagon rumbled down the street, to the mixed rhythm of hoofbeats—a team, evidently headed for the livery, horses tired but trotting, jingling home to their supper. And if it hadn't been for that danged swivel chair, *he* would be trotting over to supper—at Ernie Hitzel's place. A big, thick steak, with onions, coffee and a stack of white bread, and fried potatoes and ketchup, and pie. And now, most like, it would be chicken broth, and mebbe tea, and medicine, and taking temper'ture!

Bill jumped as some one knocked on the door.

"This is Bill Watson in this room," he said, his voice quavering.

"Of course!" a pleasant voice responded.

The door swung open, and Mary Ryerson, carrying a big tray, came in. She set the tray on the dresser and went to another room and fetched another extra pillow. She helped Bill sit up in bed, and bolstered his back with the pillows. Didn't hurt his dog-gone foot a bit, either. Then she closed the window, turned on the light, made a temporary shade of a fold of newspaper which had originally lined one of the dresser drawers, attached the paper to the electric light bulb so that its glare did not bother Bill, fetched the tray and placed it across Bill's knees.

She smiled, nodded, and glancing round the room to see if everything was in order, vanished like a mirage.

Bill stared at the door, which had been closed so softly that he scarce heard it. No elbow motion and slamming. Bill felt pleasantly subdued, kind of churchy, as he said later, and added, "Not musty, though." He glanced down at the tray, the immaculate napkin spread on it, the half of a chicken, hot biscuits, gravy, mashed potatoes, sliced tomato—slices as big as a cartwheel, cold and refreshing. Bill tried another. Then he tackled the chicken. No, they didn't intend to starve him to death, just because he had a sore foot. He ate hurriedly, frequently glancing at the closed door as though he half expected some one to come in and remove the tray before he had finished eating.

He had wrapped half a fluffy biscuit round the last dab of gravy on his plate, and had thrust the folded biscuit into his mouth when the door opened and Mary Ryerson appeared, carrying a coffeepot, and a plate on which quivered a thick, cool, yellow section of lemon pie, with a crest like a snowdrift. She didn't say a word about having baked the pie herself, or that she knew most men liked their coffee just this side of red-hot. She removed some dishes from the tray, making room for the pie and coffee, and with a bright smile and a nod that seemed to comprehend all that might have been said by either herself or Bill, departed. Bill heaved a sigh, stared at the closed door, and then turned to the dessert.

The coffee was hot and had a brilliant edge to it; none of your female coffee that goes with cookies the size of a dime and sandwiches you could see through. The pie just naturally dissolved as you drew your fork from your mouth. Yes, Bill knew that you ate pie with a fork when you had, or were, company, and with a knife at all other times. There was a woman in the building, so Bill used the fork. Golly, but it was good! Shooting a hole in his foot hadn't spoiled his appetite any, yet. And wasn't he glad Mary Ryerson had sense enough to leave the room and let him wrangle his chuck free and easylike. Now some women would have set down and cackled and tried to help, and fussed around like a road-runner fluttering around a rattlesnake—— Well, mebbe not a rattler; but anyhow, most women would.

Bill took up the knife and, glancing nervously at the door, licked the utensil clean, and polished it on a corner of the napkin. He left the fork sticky with lemon-pie filling. Mary Ryerson would notice the unused knife and at once realize he had good manners.

Now, if he only had his pipe! Just a couple of drags at his pipe would put the final and essential touch to the finest feed he had ever sat down to —or up to, as it happened. Wonder, now, if Mary Ryerson would object to him smoking a pipeful or two? It wouldn't do to spill ashes on that clean white coverlet, though. Pipe? Tobacco? Matches? In his clothes. But where in hell were his clothes?

Bill's clothing was safe enough, in Mary Ryerson's own clothespress. Doctor Ripley knew Bill, and had had Bill's essentials taken care of that he might not arise in the night and quietly steal away, without even stopping to fold his tent.

Bill could almost imagine that Mary had been watching him through the keyhole—she timed her entrances so accurately. He had just had time to sigh the second time over an empty pie plate, when Mary appeared. She placed a chair at the bedside, and on it she put a small china tray, Bill's pipe, his package of tobacco, and matches. At last Bill spoke.

"Where'd you get it, Mis' Ryerson?"

Mary didn't pretend that she thought he meant the pie or the coffee, and compliment herself on her cooking.

"Your pipe was in your coat pocket. Doctor Ripley said you might smoke, if you wanted to."

"Thanks, Mis' Ryerson. But how about you?"

"Why, I like to see a man smoke. I like the smell of good tobacco."

And without any further talk about smoking, Mary Ryerson folded back the white bedspread, disclosing a gray blanket. She gave Bill his medicine. And then, cautioning him not to bite the little thermometer, she put it in his mouth and told him to hold the end under his tongue. Hitherto, Bill had not wanted to talk. Awe had held him silent. But now that he was actually tongue-tied, he wanted to say a number of things. Mary gathered up the dishes, stacked them on the tray and set the tray on the dresser. With the thermometer at a sporting angle, Bill sat rigid, watching her. He swallowed hard. He felt an insane desire to crunch through that slender glass tube and have done with such nonsense. A man looked like a fool with such a thing sticking up in his mouth! But Bill resisted the desire to spit it out; chiefly because Mary Ryerson was in the room. Quietly she came and took the thermometer, canting it at an angle as she read it.

"Am I making steam?" queried Bill, with a robust attempt at humor.

"Not much," replied Mary. "If you should want anything, just rap on the floor with this window stick. My room

is just below this one." And again she was gone.

The room was not chilly, but something like warmth had departed from it. Everything looked flat and uninteresting. Well, anyhow, a fellow could smoke, and that would help. Help what? Bill frowned. What needed help, anyway? His foot ached, and occasionally twitched with pain. But, hell! that wasn't anything! He'd been hurt a lot worse, and stood a lot more, many a time. Bill had a vague notion that something was wrong—either wrong with him or with everybody else and everything else in the world.

Mary surely had a smooth, white neck; and such nice round arms! Not one of your regular cow-bunnies, lean and waspy and hen-faced. And not fat, either; but just plump and solid—something to her. And when she touched anything like a pillow, or the bedspread, or a plate, she touched it light. Didn't yank it, or slam it down, or fumble, nervouslike. And when she walked, she didn't hurry but walked like she knew where she was going. None of your gaited stuff! Just the plain walk-trot kind, putting them down square every step. And about taking that temper'ture. Hadn't made any fuss about it.

Bill sank back on the pillows and puffed out a thick cloud of highly flavored tobacco smoke. When the doc came, Bill would have him send Johnny Metz, the barber, over. Bill had decided to have his hair cut and his beard shaved off clean. He felt that he would recover faster if he did so. He had read in a magazine, that beards were unsanitary. He welcomed the recollection of that magazine article. It eased his conscience over a bit of rough, crooked road.

At about eight o'clock Doctor Ripley bustled in, and took Bill's pulse. He snapped shut the cover of his old-fashioned watch, and, taking a parcel from the dresser, unwrapped it.

"One of mine," he said, as he shook out a long, white nightshirt. He threw back the bedclothes. "Swing around and sit on the edge of the bed. Just slip into this."

Bill assisted by standing on one foot. Back in bed again, he assured Doctor Ripley that if he had a crutch he could get along nicely.

"You'll stay right where you are for the next eight or ten days," said the doctor, glaring at Bill over his spectacles. "A clean wound like yours doesn't amount to so much. But inflammation and blood-poisoning do."

"Eight or ten days! Great guns, doc! can't you turn me loose sooner than that?"

"Everything going right at the mine?" queried Doctor Ripley.

"Yes. Ed's there."

"Got enough money to pay your board here?"

"Well I reckon! And your bill—and some left over."

"Suppose I let you go to-morrow? Where would you go and what would you do?"

"Why, I—well, I——"

"Thought so. You'll stay right here. Just make up your mind to that, and you'll get well sooner. You're in mighty good hands. I wouldn't want a better nurse than Mrs. Ryerson."

"Nuther would I. And she can cook like hell, too."

"Glad you appreciate that, at least. Now you haven't a thing to worry about. Just take it easy——"

"There's just one thing, doc. A spell back I was reading that whiskers ain't just what you'd call healthy. Do you think you could get Johnny Metz to come over and give me a shave and a hair cut?"

Doctor Ripley hadn't studied human nature some forty-odd years for nothing. Not that there was anything to study in Bill Watson. Bill was an open book. And, aside from male vanity,

Bill Watson, or any man, would feel more presentable, more comfortable with a clean-shaven face and a hair cut. If Bill was willing to sacrifice a twenty-five-years growth of beard, that was Bill's affair.

"Why, I saw Johnny talking to Rufe Wicketts as I passed the pool hall," the doctor said. "I'll send Johnny up. Got to drive out to Williams' and see how their boy is getting along. I'll say good night. Take it easy. Oh, yes, I fetched along a cane. In case you have to get up in the night, be careful of your foot."

And briskly, yet quietly, Doctor Ripley left the room. Bill forgot about his whiskers and Johnny Metz. He saw Doc Ripley driving out to the Williams' place—a ten-mile drive. That meant twenty before the doc returned to Quimby. And that meant midnight. And Doc Ripley was over sixty years old. But he never was known to complain—always cheerful and up-and-coming. No wonder everybody swore by Doc Ripley; even though he swore at *them* sometimes, for being such hen-headed idiots and running contrary to his rules and regulations.

Gosh! It was sure lonesome, just lyin' back in bed with nobody to talk to, and nothing to do but look at the wall paper. Bill reached for his pipe, filled it, and struck a match. The head of the thing flew off; and Bill glanced around sharply to see where it had fallen. Wouldn't do to burn a hole in Mis' Ryerson's carpet or bedspread.

Dang them fancy matches! He sniffed; stared round helplessly. Something was afire! Smelled like singed wool. He slapped his chest, up and down. A faint crackling, and Bill seized his whiskers and clawed at them, extinguishing the fire before it had become a conflagration.

Bill gazed down at his beard, which looked not unlike an excelsior mattress in which some lady mouse had raised a large and active family. The outline was there, but if you touched it, it came away in charred fragments.

"Now it was just like Providence—me sending for Johnny Metz," muttered Bill.

And as though his remark was the cue, Johnny Metz appeared, exceedingly red-faced; and sleek as to hair, which was parted in two scallops, black and shiny, with a barberish exactness that was almost painful to behold.

Johnny deposited a small, lopsided, tired-looking satchel on the dresser, and took occasion to admire himself in the big, square mirror. Tonsorially he was the glass of fashion and the mold of form. His collar shone with all the ardor of immaculate celluloid, his lavender tie, with its large purple dots, pleased him enormously. His white, double-breasted linen vest, with the black stripes, was a study in itself. Johnny's black mustache was brilliantined and waxed to points of parallel perfection.

Not ungratified by his flamboyant reflection, Johnny Metz turned and surveyed Bill. "Well, Bill," he said with his professionally facetious air, "what can I do you for?"

"Shave and a hair cut. I see you fetched your tools."

"Do you think I came up here just to look at you?" queried Johnny. This was a joke.

"No. And I didn't send for you to look at, neither," retorted Bill. His temper, since the depletion of his whiskers, was uncertain.

"Sure! Van dyke trim, or a Napoleon?"

"Van-nothin'. I had a accident and burned my whiskers. I want 'em shaved off. And I want a hair cut, likewise."

"Sure! Take chloroform, or do you think you can stand it without?" Another stock joke.

Meanwhile Johnny was laying out the glittering implements of his trade.

It finally seeped through his half-inch skull that Bill was not in the best humor.

"How's the hoof?" he asked, as he rattled a brush in the shaving mug. "Doc won't have to amputate, will he?" Johnny considered this little speech rather tactful and cheering.

"Doc Ripley ain't goin' to cut nothin' off me, if I know it," growled Bill.

"But when them doctors saw off a leg, or open up your works, you *don't* know it," stated Johnny, hooking his strop on the handle of a dresser drawer and playing a double shuffle on the leather with a seemingly careless razor. He wanted to please, to encourage; to allay all Bill's fears.

"Now, old cork-foot!" Johnny approached the bed. "We'll remove the alfalfa."

Deftly he tucked a towel round Bill's neck, helped him to a sitting posture, and although handicapped by an awkward angle, removed the damaged beard easily and with dispatch. Followed a hair cut which seemed altogether satisfactory to his esthetic mind. He gathered up the tufts and scatterings of wiry hair and, holding a sample between his finger and thumb, struck an attitude.

"Pickings from *Puck*," he said, arching his glossy, black eyebrows.

Bill gazed at him sternly. He knew what pickings were, in a general way; but he had never heard of the magazine. Johnny was a good barber, all right. But aside from that, he was just a plain damn fool. Still, Bill felt grateful.

Johnny shook a bottle over Bill's head and shampooed the bay rum in.

"Smells like liquor!" said Bill, with a note of reverence in his voice.

Johnny combed and brushed, stepped back and viewed the completed canvas. "He looks ten years younger, and almost human," he declared to an imaginary audience. "Here, Bill, take a squint at your mug."

Bill took the hand mirror and peered at features he had not seen for many years. He fought the slow smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Does make consid'able difference," he said.

"For better or for worse!" chirruped Johnny.

Johnny cleaned and packed his tools and snapped the satchel shut.

"You couldn't look slicker if you was a corpse," he stated cheerfully.

As a matter of fact, Bill did look a bit artificial, with his hair slicked down against its will, part of his face tanned a deep brown and the shaven part bluish-white, by contrast.

"Just how bad was you shot?" continued Johnny. "No chance of blood-poisonin', is there?"

"Can't say," replied Bill, not unwilling to make the most of his prestige as an invalid. In fact he felt important: All Quimby would be talking about him. By nine o'clock in the morning every citizen of Quimby would know that Bill Watson had been shot, shaven and shorn. Quimby subsisted not on bread alone, but also on gossip. Bill was seized with a bright idea.

"I reckon you can step in and shave me every day," he said in an offhand way. "Makes it more sanitary."

"Glad to prune your lilacs, any time!" declared Johnny. "So long—and don't let your foot slip."

Tactful to the last, the barber of Quimby took up his tired-looking satchel, opened the door, and bowing, said: "After you, Mr. Metz!" and departed.

To be continued next week.

THE Candles of San Tomas

By

Idwal Jones

Author of "Pascual Plays Trumps," "The Singing Charlotte," Etc.

A valley in Mexico—a charming Latin señorita who could not read her own heart—bandits, led by a wily, cruel general who cloaked his grasping plans with a pious pretense—and, bitterly opposing him, an American engineer.

MACLYN PARKE, with a smothered cry of annoyance, threw the letter down upon the table. The woman, working at her desk at the other end of the screened porch, looked up from her accounts and listened to a distant sound. It was a ghostly jingle of bells from some *tropilla* coming down the mountain road above the valley. The house was three hundred yards below, but the air was very clear, the world was still, and soon the hoofbeats, drumming on the rocky path, and the rattle of the supply wagons, could be heard plainly. "When did this letter come?" he asked.

"An hour ago," she said. "It was brought in by a messenger."

"Your valorous friend, General Guzman Reyes, will have company to-night. Do you hear his bandits coming home to camp? It was a good thing I hurried, or they would have looted me—of my life. Of all the bandits that infest this country, this Reyes is the most villainous dog."

The engineer spoke in Spanish, with no trace of alien accent, for after three years in Mexico he had acquired a fluent correctness that won the praise even of his secretary-housekeeper, the Señorita Margolan.

"He is not that," she said firmly, getting to her feet. "He may be in error, but he is guided always by patriotic motives."

"By avarice, rather. What he wants is this ranch of Los Candeles, which is mine by right of purchase. Very well, let him come."

Parke dropped into a chair, poured out a glass of warm cognac, brushed aside a mosquito, and sighed.

"Paquita, if you were not in love with him, wouldn't you say he was headstrong and thievish? What less could one ask of these ex-Zapatistas?"

Parke emptied his glass a second time, and fanned himself with his helmet. The porch had the steaming heat of a baker's oven. The brass lamp hanging over the littered table exuded oil, and was smeared by clouds of midges. He could see by its light that she was both grieved and troubled. She turned her head away slowly, and her eyes seemed to be fixed at a point far down in the canyon, as if she expected a signal to flash out in the darkness and relieve the intolerable tension of the moment.

"I have given you every reason to believe that I am faithful to you, señor," she said. "Why, then, should you reproach me for attributing the demands of my friend—and the General Reyes is still my friend—a fanatical conception of his duties?"

Parke threw back his head and laughed. He rapped his boot with his riding crop, and mused a few minutes.

"Nonsense, Paquita! He acts from a fanatical jealousy. Why not? He has known you since you were both infants. He was a friend of your father's. I find it hard to think that any man who has known you that long shouldn't be in love with you."

He looked at her with an infolding gaze, with pride and admiration. The Señorita Margolan sank back into her chair, and covered her face with her hands. Then she broke into soft weeping. Her body trembled, and her emotion, pent up for weeks, expended itself so slowly that it was half an hour before she again became tranquil.

"I tell you," said Parke, "the place is accursed!"

The woman crossed herself. "The Rancho de los Tres Candeles is sacred," she rebuked him. "That is the cause of all this trouble."

The engineer took up the letter and read it once more, this time aloud:

"SENOR: The property of Los Tres Candeles de San Tomas, being a place of religious practices, its use as a residence is forbidden. In pursance with the law that forbids the functioning of priests, you will remove the person of Pedro Gomez, who officiates as guardian of the shrine. Your refusal will expose me to the painful necessity of depriving him of his life. Within one week you will surrender the property to me as commissioner of the Province of Morones. Noncompliance with this order will result in summary destruction of the property.

"Respectfully, GUZMAN REYES."

The peremptory phrasing had brought a deep vertical scowl to his forehead. He poured himself another glass of spirits, and swallowed it at a gulp. With a finger he struck beads of perspiration off his brow, then rapped his boot irritably. The hot, moist air prickled his skin. All these things were beginning to get on his nerves.

"He wants my land, so he calls it a place of religious practices, and then tries to confiscate it!" he shouted. "Well, the only person I am sorry for is the unfortunate Pedrecito, who looks after the candles."

The Señorita Margolan, her poise recovered, busied herself with the sorting of papers on the table. She spiked receipts, went over the bills of the provision dealers, the monthly pay roll, and the reports of the foreman on the well-drilling project.

"Is there anybody on the place who hasn't been scared off?" he asked, lighting a cigarette and pacing up and down the veranda.

"I am still here, señor," the woman said quietly, without looking up.

He stopped, thrust his hands into his

coat pockets, and looked down at her from his height of six feet three, and his brow slowly wrinkled. It was beginning to dawn on him that she was past finding out, and the discovery was annoying because she appeared to be so simple a creature.

"The Margolans have always been brave," he said. That was all he could find to say. He ran his hand perplexedly into his shock of red hair, then went out and sat on the broad stone step below the veranda.

He had returned only a week ago from the States to find that much had happened in the land. A band of guerillas had encamped on the property, and scared off all the employees. He had gone North to purchase more machinery for his project, and now all his affairs had been pretty well knocked on the head. Not that he was afraid of Reyes. He was afraid of no one, but all this nonsense was beginning to get troublesome. He was a scientific man, and liked to cope with material problems. There was nobody to consult with, except the Señorita Margolan, and the bandit was enamored of her. Of that he was sure.

The woman came out, closed the screen door softly, and leaned against a pillar.

"There is also Pedro Gomez," she said. "He is armed, and now sleeps at the other end of the house, where the servants used to stay."

"Why those three tiny springs of hot water should be called 'holy candles' is beyond me," he said. "They are only three jets, not even fourth-rate geysers. Yet they are looked on as holy."

He pointed out to the horizon. It was the floor of the canyon, a narrow floor, with towering walls on either haind. It was quite dark, except for a few stars, and in the distance the red dots of camp fires were sharply discernible.

"Ah, but Señor Parke, you should bear with the harmless beliefs of our poor people. For three centuries the natives have worshiped at these candles. Even before that time the candles were old, for the Mayas came there to worship in some primitive way their god, Ixitl. The little shrine of San Tomas, with the image clamped to the rock, it has been there a hundred years, and was put up by Great-grandfather Margolan."

"Much good it did to Don Enrique Margolan, your late father," said Parke.

It was indisputable that in his hours of need Don Enrique had found the local saint on the side of the enemy, or else indifferent to his plight. Five thousand head of cattle had grazed on the rancho in the days of the iron Diaz, but in a dozen successive raids the bandits had made off with them all.

In the end the old man's land was all the wealth he had left, and even that was menaced by the new government. He did not want to sell, but there was his daughter Paquita to be kept in the French school in New Orleans, and, besides, there were the mounting taxes. He could stave off the inevitable no further, and he sold the property to his American friend, Maclyn Parke, the oil expert.

Parke had forwarded the purchase money from New York, and when he came to Morones to take over the holding, he found that the just Don Enrique had been slain a month before.

"Paquita, the general must have some good in him to be the object of your admiration."

"Why, señor, should I withhold my gratitude? Who else was it that caught the bandits who killed my father? And who was it, when you engaged me as your secretary and left me in charge while you went back to the States—who was it that posted a guard to protect me and your valued property?"

"Yes, yes," said the engineer. He was not a stupid man, but it was some

minutes afterward before he felt positive that there was a note of irony in her words.

"Does that give him a lien upon your affection—and upon my property, besides?" he demanded, as he opened the door and stood aside for her to enter.

For the first time, Paquita made a gesture of impatience.

"Consider, señor, that we have known each other for many years. His father was my father's friend, that I was a bridesmaid at his sister's wedding, and that the same priest baptized us both—the good Padre Galvez."

Parke dropped into his chair, crossed his legs, and gave a prolonged humorous whistle.

"That is charming, indeed," he remarked. "And it was the excellent General Reyes who chased the good Padre Galvez from his church, and barred the door to the acolytes when they came back from the annual procession in honor of San Tomas!"

Paquita said nothing. Parke looked at her with an affection that was now almost paternal. She stood straight before him, wearing a white dress and a white mantilla caught at the throat with a silver brooch he had given her on her last birthday. She was, after all, but a naïve, convent-bred child, even though she was twenty-four. She looked at him trustfully, very gravely out of her large, brown eyes. He drummed the table with his fingers as he considered the young girl before him, but he forbore smiling.

"Señor, we must set about writing a reply," she said.

"Yes, that is so. I believe it is imperative." Then he picked up the general's letter and reread it.

"There is no harm in the candles," he said. "And there is no harm in Pedro Gomez."

"No, señor. But it is not the general's fault that the geysers be regarded by the peons as holy, and Pedro as a sort of padre. The general did not make the law expelling the priests."

He got up and went to a tall cabinet with a glass front in which reposed books, packets of letters, charts and rolls of drawing paper. After a look within, he turned.

"When I left three months ago, there was a large map of the oil survey which showed where the oil was, and where it was not, and gave very much information about the field. Do you know where it is?"

Pacquita gave him a frank, level glance.

"The general came in to demand officially the map of the rancho. I could not do less than give it up. That was required by law. I did not have time yet to tell you."

He nodded. "You did right, Paquita. I will write the general and have the message sent to-morrow. You had better retire for the night."

She bowed, and moved into the adjoining room. It was her inviolable domain. Parke had never set foot within it, and that was characteristic of him. A fine old family, the Margolans, and one couldn't decently do less for the girl than let her keep that part of the house for herself.

Here was the ponderous mahogany desk of the late Don Enrique. On the wall, against a background of red plush, hung his portrait, with candles on the ornate buhl table beneath. On the mantelpiece were ormolu and plaster ornaments. There was a great carved screen, like a cathedral reredos, and behind it the massive ancestral bed now used by his daughter. All these he glimpsed again, as she opened the door, and when it closed, he entered his office.

It had a long table littered with chunks of ore, tools, gloves, cores and test tubes, a retort and other accouterments of the geologist. He unlocked a drawer and pulled out a handful of maps, which he examined carefully.

Then his mouth twitched with amusement. The results of his survey were still secret. The general was welcome to the map he had demanded officially. Parke had expended a great deal of imagination in drawing it up for the purpose of deluding any one who might take into his head to ask for maps.

He had marked "oil" where the rock was barren, marked "dry" where promising shale had been touched, and had otherwise played little jokes on paper. General Reyes would be mystified, and also furious, and, in the end, bankrupt. That in itself would be some slight recompense for being kicked out after years of hard work and the expenditure of a borrowed hundred thousand dollars. Parke sat down, wrote in his diary, scratched off a few letters, then read a yellow-covered novel until he drowsed and fell asleep.

The old Indian woman who fumbled about the oven in the rear of the adobe brought in his breakfast, which was a pot of chocolate and a platter of tortillas. He pottered about the office, burning letters in his assay oven, packing up instruments, sweeping out, and doing other chores until noon, then he went out and saddled his pony.

He rode through the alfalfa patch and down the dry arroyo until he came to the geysers. They were three, in a straight line, and some twenty yards apart. They spouted intermittently to the height of a dozen feet or so, with much issue of steam that was visible even in the clear, sharp sunlight. The water dropped into a sort of basin which was of silica and glistened. A stone's throw away from here stood the hut of the caretaker, Pedro, a withered Yaqui with a bandeau about his white locks, who sat on the threshold, smoking a pipe.

Parke dismounted and, leading the pony into the shadow of the hut, he reconnoitered. Nowhere was there any other sign of life. The scene was like a huge, unroofed corridor, for the canyon was narrow, and the walls steep and high. A hundred yards off, under the cliff, was the oil derrick and its engine house. He made his way toward it, cautiously so as not to arouse the old man. Then he turned about. Pedro was motionless at his post, smoking, and looking at the image of San Tomas, which was a little figure of bronze clamped upon a spear of rock a few paces away, and covered with a wooden pent roof. This was the image that had been placed there more than a century ago by the grandfather of the late Don Enrique Margolan.

Parke entered the engine house, opened the door of the fuel shed, and for a moment stood blinking in the semidarkness until his eyes made out a heap of boxes loosely covered with soft coal. He was relieved. None of the store of dynamite had been touched. One by one he removed the boxes, piled them up outside, then with great labor carried them to the largest of the geysers, and tucked them under the edge of the basin. He primed a top stick of dynamite with a mercury cap, and began to lay wires. He tore off lengths of copper wire from the buildings and derrick, and spliced them end to end, and by late afternoon the line had reached the adobe. He attached the terminals to the battery box on the veranda.

Those geysers were a curse. That night he would blow up the middle one, which was the largest, and possibly the most sacred, and the farce would end with fireworks.

It had been fatiguing work, the sun had been very hot, so he threw himself upon the rattan couch in the office, and lay still for hours, half asleep.

"You have had a long slumber, señor," Paquita was saying when he opened his eyes. "Let the old Teresa bring you a bowl of hot chocolate."

Parke pressed his hands against his

temples. "Tell her to bring it, Paquita. My head aches as if it would burst."

"Ah, señor, you have been working too hard. And besides," she soothed, "you should have been more careful and worn gloves. Is it any wonder you are afflicted with poisoning and headache from touching dynamite with your bare hands?"

Their eyes met, and Parke saw that dissimulation would be useless. He motioned her to the table, where pen, ink and paper were laid out.

"Please write what I shall dictate," he said. "General," he began, when she had prepared herself, "we are in receipt of your order. I regret to differ with you. The rancho of Los Tres Candeles is not a place of religious worship. The caretaker, not being a priest, cannot be withdrawn. The place is sacred only in the Maya tradition. In the Maya law the place has lost its sacred character because the ceremony of wetting it with human blood has been neglected for a long time. It is necessary that this ceremony be repeated."

The Señorita Margolan breathed heavily, and she paused before she resumed her writing. Parke lighted a cigarette, and expelled smoke in ruminative puffs.

"By so doing," he went on, "the rancho of Los Tres Candeles will again be holy ground, and you may proceed legally with confiscation. You will consult with me regarding this ceremony at eight o'clock to-night by the middle candle." He signed: "Maclyn Parke, Engineer."

She blotted the letter, and a look of perturbation came over her face.

"It may make him exceedingly angry," she said. "He may wreak harm, perhaps burn down the buildings. No one knows what he will do," she pleaded.

"I doubt if he will have time to do anything," said Parke. "My mind is made up."

"Do not forget that he is dangerous."

He shook his head. "So are most rascals. Under the pretext of enforcing the government's order against worship, he is trying to confiscate the rancho for himself. Why else should he demand the map? What interests our military friend is the petroleum far below. Isn't it very plain, Paquita?"

Parke rapped the table, and as the squaw appeared, he gave her the letter. "Tell Pedro to carry this message to the general," he said.

The squaw departed, and the Señorita Margolan sank back into her chair, with her head fallen forward and her hands crossed on her lap. Parke turned the wick of the lamp low, dragged a stool to the edge of the veranda, and peered out into the night. The moon had not yet risen. The cicadas chirped with dry, metallic notes, and bats swooped and clawed on the wire screening. In half an hour the squaw had returned. But instead of returning to her quarters she sat on the veranda step, like a fowl too uneasy to go to roost.

"Teresa," he called down to her, "you gave Pedro the letter?"

"*Si*," she responded. With a shawl about her shoulders, she kept rocking back and forth.

The adobe was much nearer the geysers than was the camp, and Parke, after a glance at his watch, took his binoculars and looked into the canyon. Against the sky line were visible the camp fires of the general's force. Parke fancied that some of the glares were moving, and it struck him that they might be lanterns. There was now a light or two very close to the oil derrick.

The old Teresa got up, trembling, pointed into the maize, and gave a cry. Parke hurried down, followed by the two women, and the next moment he was stooping over the body of the caretaker, Pedro. He had been stabbed, and his vitality had just sufficed to carry him thus far to the house.

"That is the answer, Paquita. I told you the general was a scoundrel."

"Not that," whispered Paquita, crossing herself. "Listen, oh, my friend. The general is but overzealous. He has had ever a fanatical conception of his duties. He has noble qualities; he was my father's friend, and my own. These are sad times for us all, and violence is to be expected. It is unavoidable."

Parke stared down at her, and his lips moved.

"I see clearly what you mean. Why did I not see it before! You love him more than you love me."

She seemed hypnotized, and twisting her long hair that had become loosened and flowed down her back, she piled it again on her head, with vicious little gestures. She fixed her wide-open eyes upon him continually, almost in defiance.

"You do love the general the more, don't you?" he asked quietly.

"I could hate you!" she screamed. "How can I tell now—what my mind could not make up in months—aye, in a year!"

He pinioned her in his arms. At first she struggled, then became supine, like an overmastered bird, and she received his kiss with her eyes closed. How long they remained in that embrace they did not know, and they were recalled only by the sudden moan of the Indian woman. They turned, and she was pointing toward the farther end of the canyon. They beheld a streak of flame —two, then three streaks that coalesced into one huge blaze that mounted upward. The derrick was on fire.

"The general," said Parke, leading Paquita up the steps to the veranda, "is impatient. He shall not have to wait long."

He dropped to his knees and pressed his lips to her hand. While in this posture he seized the wires leading from the battery box, and gave them a tug, so that they came out and fell upon the floor.

"If anything befalls me, the candles revert to the Margolans," he said, getting up. "I am going to meet the general, and carry out my promise. The candles, Paquita, will not be harmed. Pray to your patron, San Tomas, that he safeguard the man you love—pray for him, Paquita!"

The woman cried out her protests, but Parke had gone, after strapping on his holster, and was now plunging through the maize. She could hear the crashing of stalks underfoot, and the rusty cries of the disturbed guinea fowl. He was gone, perhaps to meet death, when he could have stayed on the veranda with her and conveyed death to his rival.

He had refrained and marched on to meet him on equal footing. Or was it not unequal? The odds were with the general, who would surely be accompanied by his men. She threw up her hands in a sudden agony, and clasped them in despair. Then her eyes fell once more on the battery box, and she saw that the wires were hauled out.

Parke emerged through the maize and came into the clear, and within the sphere of light cast by the burning derrick. The light was blinding, and accompanied by a hollow roaring, and the pattering of timber and wires and bolts that dropped to the ground from the blazing heights. Toward the middle geyser rode six men.

Parke approached cautiously, and kept in the shadows as much as he could. The riders dismounted, all except one. From the description he recognized his foe, General Reyes, who drew nearer on horseback. As Parke stood still to watch him, the top of the derrick collapsed, and a volcano of sparks stood in its place. The general turned about and raised his sombrero in mock salute at the phenomenon. His companions roared with laughter, and pressed forward to join him, and they rode forward to the geyser. Parke gave

a challenging shout; the general espied him, and plucked out his horse pistol.

Then a light, a million times greater than that cast by the burning derrick, filled the world. The earth rocked with a terrific detonation. A ball of fire leaped upward, then followed a rending sound as of a collision of planets. Men, horses, boulders, débris were cast fathoms high, to fall back into boiling water and mud. The vacuum and the back rush of the atmosphere knocked Parke half senseless. He crawled away, bleeding at the ears, and dragged himself through the torrent of steamy water and silt. He drew himself up to a sitting posture with his back against a rock. It was the rock with the image of San Tomas clamped upon it by the ancestor of the last of the Margolans. The hut of the caretaker had vanished in the debacle. About the soft rushing of the water he could hear the patter of footsteps on the gravel, and the sound of voices.

It was the women. Paquita hurried to him, and infolded him in her arms, and wept, for she could not speak because of the quickening of her breath.

"Miraculous one," he murmured, "you made up your mind at last?"

"That I did, Señor Maclyn," she said, resting her cheek against his, "and long before I put back the wire ends in the box."

"The candles are gone, Paquita, gone with the general—*el pobre!*"

She helped him to his feet.

"Then we shall return," she said, "by the light of our love."

THOSE WHO CAN TAKE IT

LAST August, the day after the national capital celebrated Walter Johnson's completion of twenty years' service with the Washington baseball team, the great pitcher had lunch with a number of friends who asked him all sorts of questions about his experiences in the box.

"Say, Walter," one of them inquired, "just how does a pitcher feel when the opposing team hits him so hard that the fans yell, 'Take him out!' and his manager waves him to the bench?"

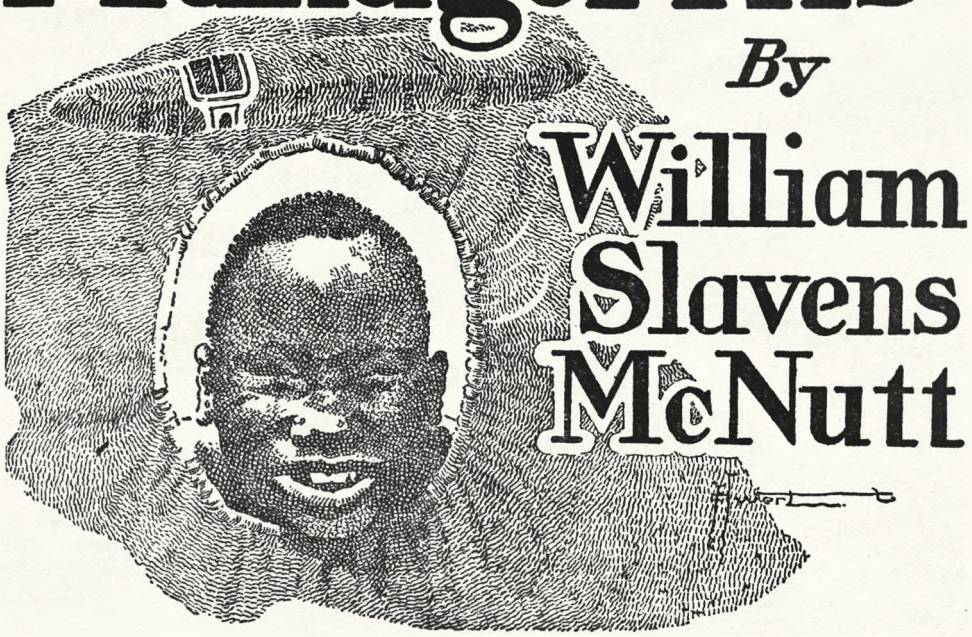
"No pitcher likes to be knocked out of the box," replied the most beloved of all ball players; "but the way I feel is that somebody has to lose in every game, and neither I nor anybody can hope to win every time. Right here, I might say, the most important, the most essential, thing a ball player has to do is to be prepared to take his bad days and then come back at the top of his form.

"If a player worries much about his errors and lets his bad days get the best of him, he will not have many good days. In my opinion this is why so many men who start out like a house afire in the big leagues fade from the picture in a short while. As the prize fighters say, they can't 'take it' and come back to finish strong."

"That," remarked another member of the party, a millionaire merchant, "applies to every sort of undertaking in life. The man who carries around a burden of worry about yesterday's mistakes breaks his own back."

"Yes, I suppose so," Walter said seriously. "To make good in baseball permanently requires as strong a character as succeeding in any other business or profession."

Managéritis



By William Slavens McNutt

Author of "In the Manner of a Winner," "The Girl in Tears," Etc.

This is the story of two more or less ambitious—but mostly hungry—youths, each of whom considered that it was much better to be the manager of a prize fighter than to be the prize fighter himself—because the manager didn't get the wallops. But it didn't work out like that.

THE trouble with us is we ain't goin' no place," said "Tub" McGruder earnestly.

"Yeh," agreed "Slim" Gandy lugubriously, "that's part of it. The other part is we wouldn't do nothin' if we got there."

The two sat on the bank of the roadside, smoking cigarettes. Tub McGruder was short and stocky; Slim Gandy long, lean and wearily disgusted with the nineteen luckless years he had thus far seen of life. The two had met and joined forces while washing dishes as a temporary financial tide-over in a Kansas City restaurant. At McGruder's suggestion they had practiced thrift to the extent of saving up fifty dollars with which they had bought the rattly ghost of an automobile. Their goal was the coast. There was money out there—McGruder said so, and he knew. He had an uncle who had gone to the coast some ten years previously and had done well. McGruder was sure he had done well because no one had ever heard from him. He was, McGruder recalled, the sort of relative who wired "collect" when in distress. There was no doubt about it, the coast was the place for a couple of unattached young men with their way to make in the world.

They would work their way as they

went; that was McGruder's idea, too. Plenty of odd jobs along the road, camp out, work a day or two here and there, have a good time and wind up a trip that would no doubt turn out to be practically a vacation, all set to collar fortune in the land of sunshine and opportunity.

They had come a total of three hundred miles in two weeks. Work was scarce along the way, and tourists in crippled cars and financial difficulties were plentiful. Their engine ran after a fashion when they could get gas to feed it, but the rubber on the old bus was better fitted for the purpose of straining soup than containing air.

They had long since lost track of the number of times they had glued on patches. They had just done their third repair job for that day, and it was not yet eight o'clock of a July morning characterized by the insufferable degrees of heat and humidity briefly heralded by farmers of the prairie country as "great corn growin' weather."

In other words, it was hot enough to bake an egg in an open field, as damp as a steam room in a Turkish bath, and altogether unhealthy and uncomfortable for every living thing of the animal and vegetable kingdoms, with the solitary exception of corn.

"We ought to have a plan," McGruder went on, wiping his damp brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

"We might get a plan," Slim said. "Plans don't cost nothin' if you think them up yourself."

"We can't do nothin' without a plan," McGruder argued.

"All right, then, plan!" Slim said irritably. "You just set right there and plan and see what it gets you. We had a plan when we left Kansas City in this old haunted tomato can, didn't we? Sure, we did! We had a plan to go to the coast and to have a good time on the way and pick five-dollar gold pieces off of raspberry bushes alongside the road when we got there. That was a good plan, and here we sit busted and hungry and thirty miles from nowhere, suckin' on our last two cigarettes and tryin' to remember what food tastes like. That's what come of one of your plans. Try again and see if you can't think up some scheme that will get us into a jail where they feed their prisoners an' give 'em a place to sleep."

"The best of men make mistakes," McGruder protested.

"Yeh, the worst of them do, too," Slim retorted meaningly. "You planned me into this; now let's see you plan me out of it."

"Well, let's think," McGruder suggested. "We'll never get to the coast in that thing."

"We don't need to think to find that out," Slim said sourly.

"Look on the bright side," McGruder urged, "we ain't so bad off. We still got the car."

"Ain't that a silver lining!" Slim said sarcastically. "Sure we got it! What are we goin' to do with it? My idea about that car is to wait here till dark and then sneak off and leave it when nobody's looking."

"We can sell it," said McGruder.

"Sell it!" Slim jeered. "Say, listen, foolish, there's just two people in all this big, wide world would buy that car. We're them, and we did."

"Course we couldn't get our money back," McGruder admitted. "We could sell it, though; it's worth something for junk."

"It's junk, all right," Slim agreed, eying the old rattletrap gloomily. "I don't know about it's being worth anything."

"Sure it is," McGruder insisted optimistically. "We could get five or ten dollars out of it, anyhow."

"S'posin' we do," Slim said wearily. "Say we got ten—what happens? We eat a couple o' meals in a restaurant and sleep a couple o' nights in a bed and get

a couple o' packs o' cigarettes apiece, and then what do we do?"

"That's just it," said McGruder; "that's what I'm talkin' about. We got to have a plan."

Slim sighed and stretched himself full length on his back and put his hat over his eyes to keep off the sun.

"All right," he said resignedly. "You set there and have one. Wake me up when you've got it. I give you fair warnin' that it better be a good one, 'cause if it ain't I'm goin' to smack you in the snoot and go on off and lead my own life in my own way. I'm tellin' you now, I mean it."

"Say," said McGruder excitedly, "that gives me an idea!"

"Yeah?" said Slim. "That makes this a great day for you, don't it? You got something you never had before."

But the other ignored the remark.

"It's a great idea," McGruder declared enthusiastically. "Did you ever fight?"

"Sure," said Slim sleepily. "You don't think I grew to be this old without findin' somebody I couldn't outrun, do you?"

"You're built for it," said McGruder, eying his companion appraisingly.

"For what?" Slim asked.

"Fightin'," McGruder explained.

Slim sat up.

"Say, what is this talk?" he asked indignantly. "Has the sun got through that thick skull of yours and scorched your brains, or what? You talk like people they keep in cages."

"It's a great idea," said McGruder excitedly. "There's big money in it."

"In what?"

"Fightin'!"

"Yeah," said Slim, "there's money in the mint, too."

"That don't help us," said McGruder, "we can't get into the mint."

"You're brighter than I thought," said Slim. "I didn't suppose you'd know that."

"But," said McGruder triumphantly, "we can get into a fight."

"All right," said Slim; "there's no sense to anything we've done since we threw in together. Let's both be plumb crazy and have a fight."

"Oh, no!" said McGruder, showing some alarm. "Not us. I don't mean that kind of fightin'. I mean prize fightin'."

"Be your age," Slim jeered. "Who'd pay to see us fight?"

"Not us," McGruder corrected him. "You!"

"Me?" said Slim, puzzled. "Who would I fight? When? Where?"

"That," said McGruder smugly, "is where I come in. I'll be the manager."

"You'll be the manager!" Slim exclaimed. "Who elected you? Why not me be the manager and you do the fightin'?"

"Oh, I can't fight, Slim. Not good enough to be a prize fighter, anyhow. You could, if you tried."

"I could not!"

"You could so!"

Slim got to his feet; McGruder did likewise. They glared at each other.

"I say I could not!" Slim said belligerently.

"I say you could so!" McGruder returned with equal heat.

"You can fight better'n I can," Slim declared.

"I cannot!" McGruder replied.

"All right," said Slim, putting up his hands, "we'll see. We'll just box easy and find out."

"All right," McGruder agreed, assuming a fighting pose, "we'll find out. No hittin' hard, now—just easy."

"Sure," said Slim. "Let's go!"

They went. For the space of a minute they danced about in the road, jabbing and swinging clumsily, each one purposely missing.

"You ain't tryin'," McGruder complained.

"I am so!" Slim insisted. To prove

his sincerity he poked McGruder lightly in the nose with his left.

"Hey!" McGruder squealed. "You said you was just goin' to hit easy!"

"That was easy," Slim insisted. "You run into it."

"I did no such a thing," McGruder replied.

"You're a liar!" said Slim hotly. "You did so!"

"Say," said McGruder, beginning to breathe hard, "you can't call me a liar."

"Can't, hey?" said Slim. "I did call you a liar, didn't I? What are you goin' to do about it?"

McGruder swung with his right. He was trying this time, and the blow landed on Slim's mouth. Slim sat down suddenly.

"There!" McGruder crowed, panting. "Call me a liar, will ya?"

"Why, you dirty crook!" Slim said bitterly. He rose and sailed into McGruder, both fists flying. McGruder met the attack with spirit. They clinched and rolled in the dust of the road, striking, kicking, butting. Slim got in a solid punch to the solar plexus. McGruder grunted, relaxed and lay limp. Slim disengaged himself, and stared at his unconscious foe, dismayed. Terror was written on his face.

"Tub!" he called anxiously, shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up! Speak to me, Tub! I didn't go to do it." His voice rose to a wail of entreaty. "Tub," please! You ain't goin' to go and die on me, are ya?"

Tub slowly opened his eyes, slowly and painfully sat up.

"Gosh!" Slim exclaimed. "You had me scared. I thought for a minute you was goin' to go and die on me. I didn't mean to hit you so hard, Tub."

A wide grin chased the expression of pain from Tub's face.

"You near broke me in two," he said happily. "Didn't I tell you you could fight? Honest, Slim, you don't know your own strength."

A knock on a dressing-room door. A rude voice in the corridor:

"All right, you tramps in there. You're on next; come and get it."

Slim Gandy lay on a cot in the dressing room, arrayed in fighting shoes and trunks borrowed for the occasion. The occasion was the night of his début as a prize fighter. The place was a hall in Millersville, Kansas, used by a local veterans' organization for their monthly boxing show. Beside Gandy was Tub McGruder, helpless, perspiring, carrying the water bucket, sponge and towel.

"Come on, Slim," McGruder said viciously. "They're waitin' for us. Go get him!"

Slim sat up. He was pale and trembling.

"Listen, Tub, couldn't you get me just a cup of coffee somehow?" he pleaded piteously.

"I got ham an' eggs for you for breakfast," McGruder reminded him. "I couldn't raise another dime if I died for it."

"I'm hungry," Slim wailed. "I can't fight on an empty stomach."

"Sure you can," McGruder argued. "It's better that way, Slim. Dempsey an' all them fights on empty stomachs. It makes 'em savage. Come on!"

"Well, give me a cigarette first," Slim begged.

"Now is that a way?" McGruder protested. "You know you can't smoke cigarettes in training. It's bad for your wind. Come on!"

A knock on the door again; a voice from the corridor: "What about it in there? You tramps comin' or aren't you?"

"Gosh!" said Slim. "I wish I had a cup o' coffee."

On trembling legs he followed McGruder down the dark corridor and into the ring roped off on the stage of the hall. A noisy mob greeted his appearance with a derisive cheer. In the opposite corner sat his opponent, "One-

round' McCarthy, the 'Dublin Devil,' a gaudy bath robe draped over his shoulders.

"He's bigger than me," Slim whispered.

"Naw, he ain't," McGruder whispered back. "It's just his bath robe makes him look that way. Go get him, kid; kill 'im! Tear him apart!"

"I ought to have a bath robe," Slim complained, "I'm cold, I'm shivering all over."

"Forget it," McGruder argued. " 'Member what I told ya now!"

"What did you tell me?" Slim inquired.

"Kill him!" McGruder said. "Kill him!"

"Oh!" said Slim. "Yeah, I remember now."

The referee approached McGruder: "What do you call this tramp of yours here?"

" 'Go-get-'em' Gandy," McGruder chattered. "Go-get-'em Gandy, the 'Carolina Killer.' "

"Why pick on Carolina?" the referee asked. "I got friends in that State, bo."

"Ain't that all right?" McGruder asked anxiously.

"We'll let it go this time," the referee said magnanimously. "But don't let it happen again."

The referee held up his hand for silence.

"I told ya not to say I was from Carolina," Slim whispered in McGruder's ear. "S'pose some one should ask me something about the State; I'd be in a hell of a fix."

"Go get 'em, kid!" McGruder said, his eyes glassy. "Kill him, kid, kill 'im!"

"Wait a minute, will ya? It ain't time yet."

"In this corner," the referee intoned, "One-round McCarthy, the Dublin Devil. One hundred and thirty-four pounds."

"I told ya he was bigger than me," Slim whispered to McGruder. "I only weighed a hundred and thirty-three."

"And in this corner," the referee went on, pointing toward Slim, "Go-get-'em Gandy, the Carolina Killer."

The crowd cheered boisterously.

"What are they yellin' about?" Slim asked anxiously.

"They ain't yellin'," McGruder explained excitedly; "they're cheerin'. Hear 'em? They're cheerin' you."

"What for?" Slim asked miserably.

"It's the name," said McGruder. "I told ya that would get 'em. Kill 'im, kid, kill the big bum! Remember, Slim, there's millions in it. Kill 'im!"

The referee called the two boys to the center of the ring.

"You two bums may be roommates," he said roughly, "but you'll give us a fight here to-night, or you won't get a dime. Break clean, that's all. Go to your corners."

"Remember," McGruder whispered, as he escorted Slim to his corner, "kill him!"

"All right," said Slim dully. "Gosh! I wish I had a cup o' coffee."

McGruder crawled through the ropes. The bell rang. The Dublin Devil rose and danced forward. Slim stood in his corner, blinking. McGruder reached through the ropes and poked him in the back.

"Go on, Slim," he shrilled. "Go get 'im; kill the big bum!"

Slim nodded and advanced reluctantly.

"Kill 'im!" McGruder shrilled. "Kill 'im!"

The Dublin Devil looked at McGruder and scowled. He touched gloves with Slim, stuck a light left in his face and whizzed over a right to the jaw. Slim sat down on the canvas, looking foolish.

"Kill 'im, Slim!" McGruder shrilled, dancing and waving his arms. "Kill the big bum!"

The Dublin Devil turned toward his

corner, looked back over his shoulder at McGruder, and muttered something under his breath. The referee was counting over Slim, counting slowly:

"——two, three—get up, you sap, you're not hurt—four, five—come on, give us a fight—six, seven——"

"Get up, Slim!" McGruder howled desperately. "You can't set there. Get up an' kill the big bum like I told ya!"

With an effort the Carolina Killer staggered to his feet. The Dublin Devil danced forward and smacked him flat again.

"Atta boy, Slim!" McGruder shrieked. "He's gettin' arm weary doin' that. Get up now and kill the big bum! Do like I told ya; get up and kill him!" But the advice was useless.

Slim rose again, more slowly this time and with greater effort. The Dublin Devil advanced. He spoke to the referee out of the corner of his mouth.

"Want me to carry this tramp?"

"Naw!" said the referee disgustedly. "He's no fun. Stiffen him and let's get the next bout goin'."

"Now you got him!" McGruder yelled as Slim stood swaying glassy eyed in front of the Dublin Devil. "Kill the big bum, Slim, kill him!"

The Dublin Devil measured Slim deliberately, and smacked a right to the button. Slim crashed to his back on the canvas and lay there, out like a snuffed light.

"All right, Slim," McGruder called to his unconscious fighter, "take your time, kid; he can't hurt you. Take the full count! I'll tell you when to get up."

The referee was counting rapidly. When he said eight, McGruder issued his orders.

"Now, Slim," he yelled, "get up! Get up and kill the big bum!"

The referee finished his count. Slim did not move.

"Hey! Slim!" McGruder called to him. "Get up! Go get 'im! Now!"

Slowly realizing that Slim would not rise to continue the fight, McGruder climbed into the ring.

The Dublin Devil spoke to the referee: "Want a laugh?" he said. "I'll put 'em to sleep together."

"Better not," said the referee. "A lot of reformers in town are trying to crab our act. Take him after you get outside, and there won't be any kick. He's a noisy pest, ain't he?"

Slim Gandy was still out like a light when they carried him out of the ring. He was still out in his dressing room when the Dublin Devil entered.

"Now," said the Dublin Devil to McGruder. "What was that you was sayin' to me while I was out there in the ring?"

"Now, listen," said McGruder backing away. "We're business men, ain't we? Let's be sensible."

"Sure!" and the Dublin Devil, grinning. "I'm a business man. Here's my card."

He shot his right and landed with a smack on McGruder's jaw, and the latter joined his partner in slumberland.

Slim Gandy was putting on his trousers when McGruder awoke.

"What happened?" he inquired, sitting up dazedly and fingering his jaw tenderly.

"Stop askin' fool questions, an' go get our money," Slim said sourly, wriggling into his shirt.

"Somebody musta hit me," McGruder said dizzily.

"Yeh!" said Slim. "We both got took down with the same sickness."

"Did you kill 'im, Slim?" McGruder asked anxiously. "Did you kill 'im like I told ya to?"

"Not unless he died from laughin' after he knocked me out," Slim growled. "Come on, now, get up an' go get our money. That's the toughest twenty-five dollars I ever made, and I want to see the color of it."

"Oh, Slim!" McGruder wailed. "I had faith in you."

"That's natural," Slim said ungraciously. "You never was right about anything yet. Come on, go get that money and let's eat. I'm hungry."

"I was sure you'd win," McGruder moaned.

"Well, I didn't," Slim said shortly. "Get our money and let's go."

"Slim, I bet it," said McGruder solemnly.

"You bet it!" Slim exclaimed.

"I was so sure you'd win," McGruder whimpered. "Listen, Slim, I got three to one. If you'd licked him like I was so sure you was goin' to, we'd 'a' had a hundred instead of just twenty-five. Don't be sore, Slim; I did it just because I had such faith in you."

"You bet our money that I'd win?" Slim asked incredulously.

McGruder nodded.

"We ain't got nothin' comin'?"

McGruder shook his head.

Slim sighed deeply, and fastened his belt two notches tighter.

"That's my dinner," he said viciously. "Have you got a cigarette?"

"I smoked the last one," McGruder confessed, "just before we went into the ring. I was so sure you was goin' to win, and I was kinda nervous."

"You was nervous!" Slim jeered. "What was the matter? 'Fraid you'd crack your voice standin' out there yellin' for me to kill 'im? Come on, let's get outa here."

"Where'll we go?" McGruder inquired miserably.

"We're goin' to get a cup o' coffee," said Slim positively. "If we're lucky, I'm goin' to mooch a cigarette some place. That much I know, too. And there's one other thing, bo—from now on I'm the manager! I speak and you jump. When I say, 'North,' that's the direction you walk, and I follow behind. Come on, smart! Let's go!"

A yokel on the corner gave them the bad news. The restaurants in town were all closed at that time of the night. Slim Gandy led the way toward the railroad.

"Where we goin'?" McGruder whined.

"Away from a town where they don't serve coffee after the sun goes down," Slim replied shortly. "I don't know when the next train leaves here, but whenever it leaves and whichever way it goes, we're goin' to be under, on, or in it. That's the way I feel about this burg."

They reached the station and made for the yards. Slim, leading, stopped and sniffed.

"Um!" he said greedily. "Do you smell what I smell?"

"Coffee!" said McGruder. "If it ain't, my nose is a liar an' a crook. Where from is that smell comin'?"

They followed the odor and located a train of cars. They were not freight cars and they were not passenger coaches. They were painted a pale yellow. Slim Gandy lit a match and red a sign on one, inscribed in black letters: "Horton Carnival Company."

"Boy!" he exclaimed. "Here's people! They come from somewhere an' they're goin' some place."

He searched the line of cars. In the rear was a lighted window. Thence he led the way. The odor of coffee grew stronger as he neared the light.

He mounted the platform and opened the door. A range was in operation, before which stood a white-coated darky. Simmering on the range sat a huge pot of coffee.

"Mister," said Slim, "we're a couple o' guys that don't live in this town, never did, an' never will. We're stuck here fer the minute, an' gettin' away as soon as possible. Meantime, we're starvin' fer a gulp o' java."

The darky grinned.

"Drink it quick," he advised, lifting the pot and reaching for a pair of cups. "The boss ain't very 'fectionate about strange bums lickin' up his vittles."

Slim Gandy grasped the first cup poured, and shivered luxuriously as the hot draft trickled down his throat.

"Have ya got just one cigarette in the place?" he asked anxiously. "Never mind two. My friend here don't use 'em, an' if he does, it don't matter. They ain't good for him, see? He's a fighter."

"A fightah?" said the darky, impressed, looking at McGruder. And then, to Slim: "Boy, what's yo' business?"

"I'm his manager," Slim explained impressively. "You know, I do all the heavy thinkin'."

"A fightah!" the cook repeated, staring at McGruder. "You boys lookin' fer wuk?"

"My man's always ready," Slim assured him. "I keep him fit."

"Say! Maybe I kin fix you boys up. I got an idee. You boys wait heah a minute, will ya?"

He disappeared through the door at the forward end of the kitchen compartment.

"Hey!" said McGruder. "What's the idea, Slim? I ain't a fighter."

"The hell you ain't," said Slim. "Prove it! I did! Now it's your turn!"

The cook returned, followed by a heavy-set, broad-faced man in a dressing gown.

"I'm Hilary F. Horton!" the thick-set man announced importantly. "My boy, here, tells me one of you bums is a fighter."

"This," said Slim Gandy explicitly, pointing to McGruder, "is the fighter!"

"Umph!" said the man, looking at McGruder. "He don't look it."

"You never can tell by lookin' at 'em," said Slim philosophically.

The man nodded and appraised him.

"What do you do?" he asked curtly.

"I'm his manager," Slim explained.

"Um-m," said the heavy-set man thoughtfully. "How do you like my coffee?"

"Swell!" said Slim fervently. "Good stuff!"

"It ain't for bums," said the heavy-set man. "You two want work?"

"That," said Slim, "depends. There's work and work."

"My African dodger jumped the show yesterday afternoon," the manager explained. "He got three balls in the right eye in succession, and quit because he thought the job was getting monotonous. He was doubling as opponent for the boxing kangaroo. That kangaroo is a funny one. He's got a habit. He always hits his sparrin' partner in the right eye. The guy claimed that that added to the monotony. I need a man to black up, stick his head through the canvas, an' let the suckers fire baseballs at him, three for a dime. Then he's to double as the sparrin' partner of the boxing kangaroo. That's one job."

"It's filled," said Slim, grinning. "I got one o' the greatest African dodgers and kangaroo boxers in the world right here with me. I'm his manager."

"I'm a manager myself," the thick-set man explained. "Manager of the Horton Carnival Company."

"My name is Slim Gandy," Slim said, "manager of the greatest unknown fighter in the world. Glad to meet ya."

"Even managers have to work, you know," Mr. Horton said, gripping Gandy's hand.

"What do I do?" Slim asked.

"Ballyhoo," said Horton. "Ballyhoo your bum here for the African dodger act and the sparring exhibition with the trained kangaroo."

"Talk?" Slim asked, his smile widening.

"Loud and long! If you're a manager, that ain't going to bother you."

"Bother me!" Slim chortled. "Boy, come around an' listen!"

The Horton Carnival Company was in full blast in Millersville. Through a hole in a canvas, a round, scared, black

face was poked. Thirty feet in front of the canvas before a counter stacked with balls, stood Slim Gandy, ballyhooing enthusiastically to the yokels thronged about him.

"Three for a dime, boys," he sang out persuasively. "Sock the Senegambian! A cigar for every gent that socks him! Chuck a ball at the boob an' get paid if your aim's good! Assault and battery free of charge, and a prize if you paste him! Three for a dime, boys! Try your luck!"

A tall young man worked his way through the crowd and lay down a dime.

"I don't want to take advantage," the young man said. "I'm the pitcher of the Millersville All-Stars, an' if I do say it myself, I got control. I ain't goin' to get in trouble if I bean that black boy up there with his head stuck through that sheet, am I?"

"A free cigar if you hit 'im!" Slim Gandy intoned blithely. "The harder ya hit 'im, the better the cigar will taste!"

The pitcher of the Millersville All-Stars wound up and plugged one true and straight. It smacked on Tub McGruder's pate resoundingly.

"One sock, one cigar!" Slim sang out, handing the smoke to the successful Millersville expert. "Two more on this dime, mister, an' more power to your good right arm! Kill the sucker, an' see who cares!"

Ten minutes later the Millersville pitcher departed with seventeen cigars and a slightly sore shoulder.

Five minutes after he left the voice of Slim Gandy called loudly from a near-by booth.

"Come one, come all! A dime a shot to see the world's champion boxing kangaroo in a life-and-death battle with that famous oversized heavyweight, Tub McGruder! Tub McGruder, gentlemen, known from coast to coast as the man with the iron jaw! He's never been knocked off his feet by man or beast, but it may happen to-day! Come in an' watch the famous kangaroo boxer, the animal freak from far-off Australia, hammer with all four gloved feet at that reckless dare-devil of the human race, that great punch absorber, that king of the cauliflowers, Tub McGruder! Come in an' watch him, ladies and gents! He sits on his tail and swings from all angles! The animal versus the man! Come one, come all! A dime a head!"

The crowd streamed in. After a little there was the sound of solidly landed blows, and grunts of pain uttered by a human being in distress.

Slim Gandy, striding up and down before the booth, sucking contentedly on a cigarette, was approached by Hilary P. Horton, the manager of the company.

"You sure yodel 'em in, kid," Horton congratulated him.

"Yeah!" said Slim contentedly. "I got my heart in my work."

"How do you like it?" Hilary asked.

"I'm sick," Slim Gandy complained.

"Yeah?" said Horton. "What ails you?"

"Manageritis!" said Gandy, grinning. "Boy that's a sweet disease!"

HOW TO CATCH A WHALE

SIMPLE SIMON fished in a bucket without much success. The experience of an Alaskan salmon fisherman is more bizarre—and more successful. A forty-foot whale wandered into his trap, and it was up to the fisherman to put the creature out of its misery. He tried for five days with a rifle, but the bullets apparently just bounced off the thick hide. Dynamite was at last used, and that did the trick, but no one tells of how much whale was left for dinner.

The Last Atlantide

By Fred Mac Isaac

In Six Parts Part II

Author of "The Progress of Peter Pratt," "Scum of the Sea," Etc.

This tale is said to be a translation of the papyrus journal, found in a Yucatan jungle, of Pagneomon, a prince of the lost continent, Atlantis. Pagneomon tells of the high civilization of that land, and how, when a boy, he visited the capital, Luth, and, at the palace of his uncle, Gathor, met Arsinhœa, the princess who was to affect his destiny greatly. At a feast with Teforn, his father, he witnessed the murder of Teforn by Negor, a power in the land. The cowardly uncle refused to avenge the deed, and even shut up the infuriated child. But the boy's aunt, Fedrath, a mystical character, helped him to escape to the care of Thoro, a learned man and priest of the evil god, Magor. There the boy grew up, skilled in warfare. The priests of Magor were really scientists, but allowed their evil reputation to exist because it secured them from annoyance. Pagneomon still swore to avenge his father, even though Negor was even more powerful.

CHAPTER VII.

A CHANGE OF DYNASTY.

A WEEK later, for the first time, I saw Thoro really angry. Entering his private hall, as I was privileged to do, I found him pacing up and down, pulling at his beard, uttering oaths and ever and anon lifting his hands to heaven. Upon seeing me, he stopped his walk, faced me with eyes that sneered, and his greeting was:

"Welcome, Pagneomon, killer of kings."

"Pardon, good father," I faltered. "I shall retire."

"No!" he thundered. "Stay. I have things to tell you, boy. At the request

of good Fedrath I received you into my establishment and have trained you for five years to carry on a private quarrel. I did it for Fedrath, who is the cleverest woman who ever lived in Atlantis and further advanced in the lore of Magor than any woman. No longer are you to be the instrument of private vengeance, youth; you will go forth as the champion of Magor to overthrow the King of Atlantis."

"Sir," I stammered, "I have no quarrel with his majesty. I am a loyal and faithful subject, if you please."

"Ha! A loyal and faithful subject of Negor?"

I bristled. "Certainly not, sir."

"Negor is King of Atlantis. Your king was assassinated yesterday with the prince royal, and Negor has ascended the throne. In a month he will wed Arsinhœa, the king's daughter, unless you prevent him."

Arsinhœa—I had forgotten completely the little princess who had scorned my forced homage, and, in truth, I thought nothing of her now. Like a fool I still considered her as a plump little girl of ten years; so far as she was concerned, Negor could have her.

But Negor was my enemy.

"How could that villain overthrow the king?" I asked in wonder.

"As commander of the army he went about the palace at will," replied Thoro more calmly. "By huge presents he bribed the leading generals and corrupted the king's bodyguard. Last night, while the king and prince lay sleeping, his minions entered the royal chambers and stabbed them to death; then Negor proclaimed himself king, the treacherous troops overran the city and put down every outbreak—and your father's murderer now reigns in Atlantis."

I fell upon a bench in despair. To meet and challenge Negor was one thing, but to reach and fight with the king was impossible. At the thought that he could never feel the bite of my sword, I lost my mind with rage. The lying stars had said I would live forever; I had supposed they meant that I would slay Negor and continue a comfortable existence. But what they really prophesied was that I would live long because I should never meet him. I determined to defy the mendacious bodies of the heaven, and, drawing from my girdle my sharp knife, I lifted it above my head, intending to die then and there.

"Desist!" commanded Thoro so sharply that I, perforce, did his bidding. In a bound he was upon me, shaking me like a leaf in a gale of wind. His strength was astonishing for one so old.

"You fool!" he cried. "Do you suppose we have trained and instructed you to have you bring our labor to naught by a rash act? Pagneomon, by our aid you shall conquer this king and slay your enemy."

I fell upon my knees and embraced his legs in my contrition.

"Pardon, Father Thoro," I pleaded. "I would have taken my life because I thought I was no longer able to fulfill my vow."

"You are pardoned," he replied more gently. "Now listen to my words with care. Negor has many enemies, but they are without organization or a leader, and he holds possession of the princess, who is the last of her line and our queen. He will set her on the throne beside him, and those who oppose him then are rebels. To overthrow Negor, the first step is to take away the princess, for thousands will rally round her standard if she is free and in the field. It shall be your task to enter the palace and fetch Arsinhœa forth to this place. We shall hold these hills in her name until we have strength enough to advance against the capital. Do you realize now that you

were an imbecile to lift your hand against yourself?"

"Yea, father," I said humbly. "When I am in the palace, may I not also kill Negor?"

Thoro stamped his foot in his anger.

"You will do what you are told, though I begin to fear you have not enough sense to obey orders. I must seek another emissary."

"Pardon, sir," I implored. "I shall do exactly as you instruct me."

"Then be silent! Negor, at present, is surrounded by loyal creatures and beyond the reach of an assassin. Besides, I have not trained you to strike at a man in the dark, but to overcome him in fair fight. The princess, from a child, has been devoted to your Aunt Fedrath; at present Gathor and his wife reside in the palace, for your uncle was one of the chief conspirators in this plot."

"That I can credit easily," I said with some bitterness.

"Fedrath will aid you in our enterprise; if possible, she will accompany you and the princess in your flight to this place."

"But how am I to obtain admission to the palace or explain my presence within its walls, sir?"

"A plan will be prepared and you will be supplied with it in good time. What is it, man?"

A servant had entered, carrying, to my surprise, a dove in his hands. Thoro knit his brows, glanced at me, then laughed.

"With you, my pupil, no need to affect the supernatural. Here is the means by which I am informed of what goes on in the capital within a few hours of its happening. This bird was raised here and then sent to Luth. When set free by your aunt it flies like an arrow to its home, bearing under its wing a message for me."

I marveled at the idea, and while I gaped he removed from beneath its wing a tiny roll of papyrus, which he began to peruse while the servant carried off the dove.

After a few minutes Thoro looked up and addressed me.

"Bad news," he said. "Nagor loses no time and has proclaimed the royal wedding for ten days from to-morrow. To-night you must begin your journey. Leave me now while I study how you had best proceed."

I went out and began to wander through the series of caves in which I had resided for five years. Often I had thought I hated them for their dampness and their gloom, which was only dissipated when all the lamps were lit. Afar off I heard the clanging of anvils where the forge men worked.

Compared to the beautiful palace upon the sea wall where I had spent my first happy years, this was a hideous den indeed, the true lurking place, to all appearances, of the powers of evil. Yet I had come to love it and the strange men who lived and died happily in the pursuit of knowledge, which, alas, perished with them and their country.

I began to thrill at my journey and the mighty task which Thoro had considered me worthy to undertake; my assurance was such that I did not doubt my ability to perform it. Aunt Fedrath I longed to see again, and it would be pleasant to have her among us. As for the little princess, unless her views of what was due to her exalted rank had changed, she would be somewhat of a nuisance. To think I was so besotted!

Some hours later I was summoned again to the presence of Thoro. He sat under his lamp, his massive brow resting upon his hand, elbow upon the table.

"As soon as it grows dark," he said, "you depart. You will wear no armor or sword, and will ride a pack buthom, which you will abandon in the forest

two hundred paces from the west gate of Mummor. You will hide there until you observe somewhere about you a blue-green fire, which you will approach, and by the fire you will find a man whom you will salute and do his bidding."

Although I disliked setting forth without arms, I nodded, for it was ill to protest too much to Thoro. As though he had read my thoughts, he smiled and said:

"If you have no sword you shall not be unarmed, for I shall supply you with fireballs."

You will remember that the slaves who guided me from Luth to the mountain had dispersed a band of soldiers by hurling a fireball among them. It had terrified me almost as much as the warriors, but I had learned something about the weapons during my sojourn in the caves and no longer considered them supernatural. They were, in fact, a discovery of the predecessors of Thoro, the secret of which was carefully guarded, for they were to be used to defend the priests of Magor in the event that a religious war brought the supporters of Garthe into the field.

Near the smoking mountain was to be found large quantities of a yellow stone which crumbled at the touch—undoubtedly sulphur—and which in combination with another poison would burst into flames. The fireballs were made of sheep's wool soaked in the burning water and covered with a cloth which prevented evaporation, for the burning water was highly dangerous.

When one wished to use the fireball, he penetrated this cover with a sharp stick coated with the yellow and red stuff of which I spoke, which immediately flamed and set the burning-water-soaked wool on fire—and the ball burst with a loud noise, spreading fire and death in the vicinity where it fell. It was necessary to hurl it quickly or it might burst in your hands; but I had become adept at hurling the balls and had no longer fear of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

I VANQUISH SIX ROBBERS.

I SET out that night upon my journey, unattended, with no other instructions than those I had already received. Thoro kissed me on the forehead, commended me to the care of the powers of nature, and bade me show my black token of priesthood should I fall into the hands of the enemy.

"If there is one among them who belongs to us, he will come to your aid," he explained. "If all are enemies, they will not know the meaning of the shell."

My various masters, good men all, assembled to bid me farewell, and I parted with them not without emotion, priests of evil though they were supposed to be by the ignorant and superstitious.

My buthom was an ordinary brute and not very fast, for it was not desirable for me to attract attention to myself as riding a racing bird. I was garbed in the brown tunic of a slave, with a pouch, hung from my shoulder, which contained food for my journey in one compartment and three fireballs, each the size of an infant's head, in another.

While I had dreamed of taking my departure from the caves in rich raiment, with gleaming armor and sword and spear of the strange, glittering, gray metal, mounted upon a superb bird and followed by an imposing train, I set forth cheerfully enough. As I moved down the mountainside in the darkness I began to enjoy the thrill which comes to a youth when he first rides to adventure.

After all, it was a tremendous task which had been set me—to penetrate

the royal palace itself and steal from it our rightful queen. It would be partial vengeance upon the vile Negor to carry off the girl whom he wished to marry to legitimize his crown.

In the distant past there had been many huge and ferocious animals which roamed over Luth and devoured the peasants. There was a beast which was five times as high as a man, with a tail at each end of him—the front tail being used as a hand—who possessed a pair of long, curved tusks and made a noise like a great trumpet. His charge was irresistible. (The mammoth.) There were statues of him in the great square at Luth; but man had eventually extinguished the breed.

There still roamed in the forest about Memmor a gigantic cat which also possessed long ivory tusks—undoubtedly the saber-toothed tiger—and there came out at night, in these same forests, packs of wolves nearly as big as cows. None of these beasts had we seen on our journey five years before, and I was uneasy at the thought of them, for I had naught except the fireballs to defend myself and a stout knife hidden under my tunic.

But in the barren country around the mountain over which I picked my way all the first night there were no dangerous animals and few humans to molest a traveler. I continued on until the sun had risen high in the eastern sky; then I sought rest in a ruined hut and slept until nearly sunset.

I was near to the beginning of the king's road, which would be patrolled by soldiers. They would be more alert now than of yore, because of the recent events in Luth, and they might capture me, question me, and slay me out of hand if I blundered among them. Therefore, I waited until dark and rode cautiously.

As the feet of the buthom made no noise, it was possible that I might be among the soldiers without warning, and so I peered into the darkness, ready to dart off the road and lose myself in the countryside.

I was now on the plain of Luth, and habitations began to appear, indicated by twinkling lights like stars here and there. Once I saw several tiers of lights, which meant that they were from the windows of a castle of some great lord.

There were no concealing trees by the roadside as yet—I would not reach the forests until next day. I had ridden for two hours when I saw a light ahead, apparently upon the road itself, which by its flickering seemed to be a camp fire. Immediately I swung my buthom off the stone pathway and began to pick my way through the fields, intending to pass the fire at a good distance and return to the road when it seemed safe.

I was abreast of the fire when my ears were split by a scream from a woman. There was something irresistible about that cry, and, despite the fact that it was none of my affair, that I was upon momentous business, I pulled the head of my beast toward the fire and crept up upon it.

While still concealed by darkness, I drew close enough to witness an amazing spectacle. There were half a dozen men about the fire. One lay bound on the ground beside it, and fastened to a stake driven in the earth was a young woman, the same who had shrieked so piteously.

There was in Luth a queer little beast, half serpent, half crocodile, which lived by the side of rivers in the mud and would fasten his teeth in the flesh of persons who walked there or who were foolish enough to lay themselves down. It was a repulsive creature whose fangs were strong enough to tear away a piece of flesh as big as an egg.

As I looked upon this scene, one of the men advanced toward the girl, hold-

ing this picta threateningly in his hands. Again the girl emitted the frightful and pitiful scream.

Some of these ruffians were armed and others had laid down their spears for convenience, but all wore swords. I saw, though, by their dress that they were not king's soldiers. Forgetting that I had no weapon, I drove my buthom at full speed toward the fire, uttering a shout to terrify them into abandoning the torture of the girl. My beast charged with its penetrating cry and struck one man and trampled him. Another aimed a spear at me, but I evaded it, grasped it by the shaft, and tore it from his hands.

Half a dozen now came at me with leveled spears, but I was mounted, and the dread of the buthom was still great with footmen. I saw that the villain with the picta had dropped it upon my shout and was now coming at me with drawn sword.

I drove my beast straight at the spearmen. Several of them fled; but one thrust his weapon into the breast of the bird, which uttered its fearsome wail, and I felt it falter beneath me. I transfixed the fellow as he tried to withdraw his spear from the buthom, and leaped lightly to the ground as the bird fell.

Seeing me dismounted, those who had fled began to return, for they were sure that one man had no chance among half a dozen. True enough; but Prince Pagneomon of Azoria was no common man, while these fellows were miserable brigands of the plain. So, ere those who had fled were again in the field, I had slain one of the two who stood his ground, picked up his sword from the ground, evaded the spear thrust of the other, and drove the sword into his heart.

Now I faced three spearmen, who approached cautiously but with sufficient confidence. Their spears were about the height of a man, not as long as those carried by soldiers but too heavy for javelins—at least, so it seemed to them. I tore the spear from the breast of the dead buthom; then, to the astonishment of the trio, I lifted it like a javelin, heavy as it was, and drove it at the nearest with such force that it passed clean through his body and the head of it stuck out some distance from his back.

Now, arming myself with the spear of the second dead man, holding the sword in reserve, I faced the pair. But the battle was over. Seeing what I had done to their comrade, each of the two was sure that I would hurl my spear through him, and both turned tail and fled into the darkness.

I turned to the victim of these brigands. She huddled against her stake, unable to move hand or foot. Stepping behind her, I cut her bonds with my sword. The girl looked up then, smiling tremulously, and I saw that she was beautiful and had fine blue eyes, while her yellow hair hung heavily upon her shoulders. As soon as she was free she fell upon the ground, embraced my knees, and kissed them.

"Surely you are the great god, Garthe himself, come to earth to save a miserable maiden!" she sobbed. "I thank you, I thank you, I thank you."

"No god—just a young man who is glad to have saved you."

"Then you must be the king himself, for no other could vanquish six in combat."

"If you mean the dog Negor, I regret having come to your assistance!" I exclaimed in fury, for thought of him always angered me.

"Pardon, sir," she pleaded. "I meant no harm. Would you also cut the bonds of my poor father?"

I had forgotten the bound man on the ground, although the fight had waged at times across his body. I stepped toward him and cut the cords; but the fellow did not move. I

stooped down and saw that he was dead. The girl read the news in my face and fell upon the body with great lamentation, while I waited uneasily.

Now I had time for reflection, and I realized that I had committed a wrong by interfering since my buthom was dead, I was afoot, and could never reach Mummor to-morrow night in time to carry out my orders.

I was drawn from my bitter thoughts by the sight of the picta, which was creeping toward the girl with the intention of biting one of her legs, and with a shout I thrust the noisome beast through with a spear.

This roused the girl, who now stood wringing her hands and moaning her sire. Suddenly she dropped on her knees before me and looked up imploringly.

"My father was a noble of Mummor," she said. "Great gentleman, will you confer on me one more favor? Devote to me these four dead dogs, that I may offer them to Magor for safe passage of my sire to the realms of Garthe."

With difficulty I suppressed a laugh, for during my long sojourn in the caves I had forgotten this superstitious nonsense, and, being aware there was neither Garthe nor Magor, it seemed droll to me that any one should still believe in these idols. However, as it would console the girl, I gravely consigned my slaughtered brigands to her, and she went about the rite of consecrating each of the bodies to Magor with all seriousness.

Meanwhile, I was growing uneasy, for the uproar of the fighting, the burning fire, and our delay might bring down upon us a patrol of the king's men. Yet I had not the heart to interrupt her as she drew blood from each corpse and touched the forehead of her parent with it, the while she said the necessary prayers.

I saw that the old man must have died of torture, for there were a dozen picta bites upon his body, after which they had begun upon the girl. Why had they chosen this special torture? I wondered.

Presently the girl rose from her rites, came to me, and kneeled again, placing my right hand upon her yellow hair.

"Now I am your slave, sir."

I did not know what to do with her; in truth, I did not wish to take her with me. Yet how could I leave her to the mercy of the robbers, who would return as soon as I departed?

"I'll escort you to the vicinity of Mummor," I said. "Come."

I took her arm and led her away from the fire, walking down the stone road—which was hard upon my bare feet, for, as a supposed slave, I wore no sandals.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF MURNOVA.

"YOU would abandon me at Mummor?" she pleaded. "Take me with you, sir?"

"I am upon a very dangerous mission, girl, and I must proceed alone. Already I have committed an indiscretion by helping you, for my buthom is dead and I shall be late for a certain appointment."

It was so dark I could not see her face, but I heard her utter a joyous sound.

"Then I may help you, my preserver. My father hid the two buthoms which brought us here in an old hut not far away."

This was good news, if the brigands had not already stolen the birds.

"Hasten to them," I said. "How does it happen that a noble like your father took his daughter into such a wild place and fell into the hands of the robbers?"

She did not answer for a few seconds, then said timidly:

"You spoke ill of King Negor, my lord. You are not of his party?"

"No," I said shortly.

"Would you like wealth?" she asked eagerly. "I can give it to you."

"I do not need it. Answer my question, girl."

"Then know that the king's brother reigned in Mummor, but when news came of his death, Prince Horthe was slain by Zuthor, a lord of Mummor who is a friend of Negor's, and he seized the government. My father, Neomontha, was an ancient enemy of Zuthor and also his creditor, and when the news came to us that Zuthor was governor, he collected his most precious jewels and gold and, taking me with him and half a dozen slaves, escaped from the city. He planned to hide his wealth and conceal himself and me in one of the abandoned villages, in hope that Negor might be dethroned at some future time. The night we left there was great slaughter of enemies of Zuthor, and none is now alive there who would befriend me." She sighed.

"But where are your slaves?"

"We were attacked early to-night and the slaves defended our escape with the buthom laden with our wealth. Having reached the place where my father wished to hide his treasure, we hid our mounts in a hut, buried our fortune at a certain spot, and were making our way back to our birds when we were captured by the robbers. They had slain our slaves and forced a confession from one of them of our purpose; therefore, they proceeded to torture us to find the place of concealment." She was weeping and I needed no more information, so I touched her on the shoulder in friendly fashion and bade her say no more.

I wondered if Thoro knew that Mummor was in the hands of a new ruler and if it would make a difference in his plans, and I wondered how to dispose of this helpless creature who trusted herself to me so completely. Before I had arrived at any conclusion, she found the hut where the buthoms were concealed.

"Where is the third animal, which carried your gold and jewels?" I demanded.

"We were leading him when the robbers attacked us, and he made off into the darkness."

"Very well. Let us mount and be on our way."

We had ridden for some minutes when I bethought me of the fireballs which I carried. Forgetting them completely, I had rushed with empty hands into a battle with six robbers, when one of these, tossed among them, would have dispersed them without risk to myself.

On the other hand, I had but three and they might be needed for more important work later on; so perhaps it had been for the best that I had behaved so rashly.

Knowledge that this girl was one of the noble caste made me feel kindly toward her. That her father had been an enemy of Negor and his friends was another reason for me to befriend her. Yet she was beautiful and young and helpless and I was a gallant youth —so, had she been an enemy also, most likely I still would have desired to be of service to her.

We rode through the night, turning aside once to permit the passage of a patrol which was almost upon us. These birds were more rapid than that which I had bestrode, and we soon made up the time I had lost in my battle with the brigands. The morning light found us padding along the stone road and warned me that we had best take refuge. The ruins of a temple of Magor which appeared on our right seemed to me a safe hiding place, but when I indicated it to the girl she drew back in affright.

"Nay, sir. We dare not enter the abode of the evil god. Something horrible would come to us."

"This is an abandoned temple; worship of Magor is prohibited, and the god no longer lives here," I said soothingly.

"I fear him."

"I have a talisman against Magor," I assured her. "I command you to enter with me."

She made no further protest, but I saw that she trembled as we rode through the portal.

Magor, as I have explained, for a long time had not been worshiped publicly, and the temples of past ages had been abandoned.

In the long ago his priests had been ignorant fanatics. Thoro and his crew ruled far more successfully when the cult of Magor was secret than when it had been open; the mystic order of the black god was everywhere, and the ignorant obeyed with more alacrity instructions given in the dark.

Chance had drawn me into a supposedly deserted temple where the old rites still prevailed. The image of the black god in black marble, thrice the size of a man, still stood in this temple, the exterior of which seemed so dilapidated, and upon the white stone of the altar below him I saw by the morning light bloodstains of recent origin.

And while I gazed I was seized from behind, my arms pinned to my side, while the girl, screaming, was treated likewise.

And now from behind the image came the priest of Magor, a long-haired, gray-bearded ancient whose eyes burned bright with insane fires.

"Well met," he said ironically. " 'Tis long since Magor has had worthy sacrifices."

Eying him sternly, I repeated the mystic salutation of Magor, which was said in a tongue unknown to modern Atlantides, saving only priests of the cult.

Astonished, he mumbled the reply, then made sign to his assistants to release me.

"Who are you, boy, who speaks the ancient language of the black one?" he demanded.

With my right hand I drew from under my tunic the black shell with its curious carving, and at sight of it he fell prostrate and struck his forehead against the earth.

"By what right do you make sacrifices to the black god?" I shouted. "Know you not that only by the high priests in the hidden places does Magor now demand them?"

"I hold with the ancient customs," he mumbled.

"Then upon you I shall lay the blasting curse of Thoro himself." And I began the imprecation.

With a howl in which he was joined by the other fanatics he implored me to cease.

"Very well," I said calmly. "Set food and drink before us and keep sharp watch of the road, lest soldiers come this way."

The old man scrambled to his feet and gave sharp orders, and in a moment we were alone in the chamber.

With a smile I turned to my companion and saw that the creature was gazing at me in horror while she made the circular sign with her left forefinger which implores the protection of Garthe. I lifted my hand to soothe her, but she shrank away.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You, whom I adored as a messenger from Garthe, are a servant of Magor."

In vexation I bit my lip, while she continued:

"Now I know whence came the strength to conquer six; perchance you are Magor himself, despite the blond hair and blue eyes—a disguise, of course."

"You are a fool," I said angrily. "And even if I *were* Magor himself, I saved you from being bitten by the picta and tortured by the robbers. No doubt you cried to Garth, but did he save you?"

"No," she said slowly. "If I wrong you, you must forgive me. Are you really a priest of the evil god, or is this a hoax to save our lives?"

"Think what you will," I said shortly. "Meantime, here is food and drink, which we need."

The priest had entered, followed by four men bearing dishes and a table. We sat ourselves upon the stone floor and I began to eat meat and drink wine with satisfaction, for I was very hungry; but the girl would not eat and continued to gaze at me in fear.

Now, although she was very beautiful and I had been for five years apart from women, I did not yearn for this creature nor wish to take her in my arms; nevertheless, it irked me that she admired me no longer—that was the man of it. I signaled to the priests to depart, and regarded her in ill temper.

"What is your name?" I demanded.

"Murnova, lord," she said meekly.

"Murnova, we must remain here, hid, until night. When darkness comes, you will take your buthom and go where you wish. You are free; there is no spell upon you; I do not want you—in fact, your presence is an embarrassment to me."

"No spell upon me?" she repeated. "Lord, if you leave me, what will become of me?"

"Perhaps the great god Garthe will inform you," I said coldly.

"You are so comely, and so brave and strong and kind. How can you be evil?" she intoned.

"Have I done evil to you?"

"Nay, lord."

"Then go while you are safe."

"But I shall be killed or tortured by robbers or eaten by beasts."

"Better than associate with a priest of Magor."

Suddenly she smiled.

"No," she decided. "I care not what you are. If you are of Magor, then I will ask him to accept me. I follow you, lord; I love you."

"Think of your soul."

"I care no more for it!" she cried.

"Very well," I said, still trying to be cold, though her declaration moved me. "We have a long march to-night, so lay you down and sleep."

Obediently she rose and lay down on the stone floor, where in a few moments, being exhausted, she slumbered. While she slept I watched her for a while and wondered that such a beauty could love me and leave me unmoved by her charms.

Deciding that the mad priests must not be permitted to suppose a high priest would be contented with any but the best, I summoned him and ordered him to bring cushions and robes and guard me while I reposed. I watched him carefully and decided that a Magor miracle was necessary to convince him of my sanctity, for, as I slept, he might have decided to sacrifice me, anyway.

Perhaps I have not already stated that the clever savants of the caves made use of miracles to impress the ignorant—feats that terrified me when I first beheld them, but which were tricks that I was taught among many more important matters.

So, when the priest returned with the cushions and robes, I stood up before him, and this is what I did: I removed my head from my shoulders and placed it under my arms; I summoned up a regiment of devils, who fell down and worshiped me; I extended my finger and fire shot from it; I turned myself into a woman, and, pointing to Murnova, caused her to assume the appearance of a man. Then I replaced my head where it belonged and lay myself down safely to sleep.

None of these things did the wandering fanatic disciples of Magor understand; but I shall tell you so that, if you are not a slave of superstition who some day may read these lines, you will not think me a liar. I fixed his eye with mine and took possession of his feeble mind with my stronger one; then I made him think he saw all these fantastic happenings, though everything was inside of his own head.

When I woke it was twilight. The old priest sat in the doorway, his followers posted at points along the road. When he saw that I was awake he saluted me most humbly and implored my blessings. I performed a few more stupid miracles in the same manner, then touched Murnova on the shoulder to awaken her, and commanded the priest to lead over the buthoms.

Once away from the foolish priests, I rode thoughtfully, again considering the problem of this female burden and wondering what Thoro would advise under the circumstances. Presently we approached a signal tower and I read with interest the message which was being sent by the system of bent poles of which I spoke.

"Apprehend and bring to Mummor old man named Neomontha and daughter," was what the sticks were saying. I said nothing to Murnova, but I knew that she was right in declaring there was no safety for her in Mummor. In a few hours we would enter the forest and presently I would see the blue-green fire and meet the person who would tell me what to do. How explain the woman?

CHAPTER X.

THE BLUE-GREEN FIRE.

THERE are few trees in this hot country like those which grew on the plateau of Luth. Some of them were many centuries old and were enormously high, with thick trunks and great, spreading branches which obscured the sunlight. When cut, each tree would have provided enough timber to build a big house, had it not been prohibited to construct houses of anything but stone, lest the trees all should be destroyed.

In this land the trees are rarely tall. On the other hand, the small plants grow so rapidly and become so dense that it is impossible, almost, to make one's way through such a forest.

Under the branches of the trees of Luth there was plenty of open space, for they did not grow too close together, and one might travel with ease through any part of the forests, without being forced to remain upon the king's roads.

The grass was thick in places; in others a sort of gray or brown moss covered the leaf-strewn ground. Certain small serpents lurked here, and it was the hunting ground of the great cat of which I have spoken, as well as of bears and bands of savage wolves. Alone I would have entered at night with some alarm, and the presence of a woman with me did not make the undertaking less hazardous.

But we traveled without molestation for hours, until I was certain I was nearing the place where I would see the blue-green fire. Afar off we heard the howling of wolves, and once the unpleasant scream of the mighty cat, at hearing which our birds became almost unmanageable.

Whom I should meet in the light of the strange fire, or what my orders would be and what I should do about the girl, I did not know; but I decided to hide her in a tree when I saw the flame, tie her buthom near by, and interview my instructor alone.

Until now I had told the girl nothing of my mission, nor why I moved toward Mummor, where danger awaited her, nor the reason for my leaving the roadway after a time and

following a route through the forests which I directed by an occasional glimpse of a certain star. She had not asked any questions, but seemed content to be near me and to permit her fate to rest in my hands. She uttered a low cry when she heard the roar of the great cat, but said no word, and I admired her courage for that.

I was peering ahead for a glimpse of the fire, when a sharp utterance from her drew my attention to our right, where she was pointing. Afar off I saw a radiance of a strange, unearthly sort which I recognized as my guide, and at once I turned my buthom in that direction. Then the girl grasped my arm.

"Nay, dear friend," she pleaded. "Go not that way. It is the work of witches; no doubt Magor holds revel."

"And what have I to fear from Magor—or you, since you have declared your adherance to him?"

"Ah, I know; but that is so fearsome. I am frightened, lord."

"Listen, Murnova," I said to her. "I have business in this forest, and that light is set to guide me to a meeting place. I will approach near to it; then I will hide you in a tree and go on alone."

She grasped my arm, and I felt her nails in my flesh.

"No, no," she begged. "Do not leave me. If you go on I shall go with you. I will not be left alone in this frightful place."

"You must do as I bid you. In a tree you are safe, if you make no sound. I have to meet one in the light of that blue-green fire, then I shall return for you. I do not wish him to know I am accompanied by a woman."

She sighed plaintively; but I heeded her not, and we rode perhaps a thousand paces toward the light, which now burned very brightly and then faded to dimness, always blue or green. I could hear her teeth chatter, and had I not been versed in the tricks of our priesthood I might have been terrified myself.

At last I stopped and helped her to climb into the branches of a very big tree, gave her a knife to protect her, tied her buthom to another tree, took note of its direction from the fire, and prepared to depart.

"Lord," she called from above, very softly.

"Speak soft. What is it?"

"If we never meet again, I love you. Garthe guard you!"

"And you," I replied mechanically, though I did not believe in his powers. "Come not down nor utter a sound until you hear me call your name."

I then rode on with more speed, and around me I heard voices, mocking, eerie laughter as of disembodied spirits. Presently across my path danced a line of human skeletons, gibbering, outlined by the weird light behind them; but I drove my buthom at them and they vanished. These were but tricks to keep away from the fire persons who were not concerned with it; few in Luth would dare approach a place where there were such manifestations of the presence of the black god. I continued to advance.

Presently I came upon a camp fire, over which stood an old man who shook upon the flames a powder that gave them their blue-and-green appearance, and, knowing him for my man, I dismounted and approached him. He straightened up, and I saw that he was a stranger to me. He was very old and had a long white beard, and the flowing black robe of a priest of Magor.

"Greetings, Pagneomon," he said in a deep bass voice. "None but the son of Teforn, Prince of Azoria, would have dared to pass the apparitions."

"Greetings, father. I come for your blessings and your instructions."

"And Thoro—how is the master?"

"Well, but greatly angered at the change in the dynasty."

"We shall oust this upstart king with your aid, Pagneomon. Now, since this fire has served its purpose, I shall extinguish it."

With a spade he dug earth, which he threw upon the flames. I aided him in stamping out the sparks.

"Now I shall lead you where we may talk," he said.

My heart smote me, for the girl perched in the tree might die of fright ere I returned. Then, as this was a kindly old man, I ventured to tell him what had happened and how the girl was upon my hands.

"I knew her father," he said sadly. "He was a good man but not one of the brotherhood. Nevertheless, I would help his daughter. Go, fetch her; I shall attend you."

With some difficulty I worked back to the vicinity of the tree where I had placed her, and I would have passed it by had her buthom not made an outcry at the moment. Then I called her name softly, but received no answer. Alarmed, I cried it aloud. Still no reply. But I located the animal and from him found the tree. Again I called and waited in vain for an answer. I climbed the tree, shook it violently in my anxiety, raised my voice in the forest. The girl was gone.

Thinking, after all, that I had mistaken the tree, I uttered a loud shout, which was echoed through the wood; but poor Murnova remained silent. There was no way of learning what had happened to her, and I had no time for longer search.

Sadly I unfastened the buthom and led him back, guided by a lighted lamp in the hand of the old priest. Had Murnova become alarmed and fled, she must have taken her bird; it was madness for a woman, armed only with a short knife, to be alone in that forest at night. Robbers would have seized her mount with avidity, for buthoms were scarce. Her disappearance was beyond my comprehension.

The priest lifted his lamp above his head so that he could see my approach, and he, also, was surprised to find me coming alone.

"Perhaps she saw the apparitions and fled in terror," he said thoughtfully. "I shall have search made for her in the forest."

Putting both fingers into his mouth, he blew a sharp blast, and in a moment there came tumbling out behind trees half a dozen curious creatures. These were men who wore black robes upon which had been painted in white the figures of human skeletons and who wore skull masks upon their faces. In the obscurity of the forest only the white marks were visible, and these were calculated to terrify any simple foresters who might be attracted by the blue-green flame which had been lighted as a beacon for me alone.

"There is a woman, a friend, lost in the forest," he said. "Find her and bring her to me. Scatter now."

The slaves withdrew in several directions. Then the priest took my arm, extinguished his lamp, and led me to a great tree. This tree was four or five times as wide at its base as a man is long—one of those giant growths such as no man has ever seen in this new country. When my guide had touched the bark in a certain spot it slid away, and he led me into the heart of the tree. With a flash of his fire stick he lighted the burning-water lamp, and, to my astonishment, I found myself in a well-furnished chamber as large as a sleeping room in my palace on the sea wall.

As it had been cut out of the wood, the carpenters had decorated the walls and the ceiling with carvings, while heavy furs were soft under the feet and there were couches. In the center was a flat stone upon which a fire

could be built, and a chimney extended through the tree for a long distance, reaching the air at a spot so high that escaping smoke would be unnoticed.

"Sit down, comrade," said the priest. "If the woman is still alive, my slaves will find her. Now tell me of my friends in the caves."

He asked after various savants whom I knew, and I told him how they fared. Then he brought forth meat and milk, and we ate together. When we had finished, he began upon my business.

"In three days," he said, "Zuthor, who has slain the king's cousin and made himself lord of Mummor, will send forth Tathe, his friend, with a score of soldiers, bearing a message of loyalty and adherance to Negor, king in Luth. We had another plan to bring you to Negor's palace, but the assassination in Mummor has forced a change. Now it is decided that you will waylay Tathe and his band, slay them, don their garments, take possession of their credentials, and present yourself before the king."

"I am a good soldier, I hope," I protested. "Yet I doubt if, single-handed, I can overcome twenty."

"You will have at your command fifty men, Pagneomon."

"I need not so many," I said proudly.

"It is essential to the success of the plot that no member of Tathe's band survives to betray you; therefore, you must be overwhelming in force."

"And how about the loyalty of the fifty, good father?"

"They are men whom we trust, all sworn to the overthrow of King Negor. Remember, not a soul in Tathe's band must be left alive."

"I do not like to slay those who are wounded."

"You cannot be woman hearted at such a moment. The destruction of Negor hangs upon the success of the first move."

"Very well," I said sullenly. "It shall be done."

"For two days more you shall dwell in this tree; then your men will gather here and you will lead them to a point twenty thousand paces beyond Mummor, but convenient to the king's highway."

"And how about the message stations of the king, which will send along word of the battle?"

"At that point our friends are in charge of the station. No whisper of what has happened shall be sent along. You will proceed to the palace, where you will be welcomed as Tathe, who is not know in Luth, and you will be given lodgings there. It is your duty to reach the princess and bear her off —but how we do not know. Fedrath, perhaps, may help you, and we have a few of the brotherhood within the walls; but Thoro can do no more for you than gain you admittance."

"That is very much. I shall not fail him after that."

"I am sure of it. I am Perath, once a soldier, once a great merchant, now an exile from Mummor. You are Pagneomon, from whom great things are expected. Now let us sleep."

"I must know about this girl."

"When she is found they will signal to me. Sleep, young man."

By the gleam in his eye I knew he was using his will to put me to sleep, but at the moment I had no power to resist and slipped into a long and dreamless slumber.

From this I was waked by Perath, who held in his hand a cup of milk, warm from the cow, and slice of brown bread.

"The girl—Murnova?" I demanded —my first waking thought.

The old man made an apologetic gesture.

"We could not find her. 'Tis strange, for my slaves know the forest and searched long after daylight. I

am most alarmed lest she might have been a spy set upon you, young man."

This was too absurd, considering the situation in which I had discovered Murnova, and I gazed intently at Perath, for it occurred to me that he had discovered the young woman and, fearing her presence might impede our great plans, had put her out of the way. Catching his eye ere he was aware of my purpose, I threw him into a state where his mind must answer mine truthfully, just as mine had obeyed his when he ordered me to sleep, and then I questioned him again and received the same answer. In some mysterious way she had vanished, and, being aware of the state of her heart toward me, I knew she had not gone willingly.

Perath was suspicious when he emerged from the sway of my will; he understood what I had done to him and demanded an explanation. This I gave him honestly and appeased him.

"This afternoon," he said, "your men will leave Mummor by devious routes and assemble here to-night to accept your leadership. In the meantime, let us study this drawing of the road from Memmor to Luth, that you may be certain of the spot where you will attack the ambassador."

He spread before me on a table a plan of the king's highway. The road ran straight as an arrow between the two cities through a country which, flat as a board, seemed to offer no place of concealment. At a certain spot, about twenty thousand paces from Mummor, he placed his finger directly upon the forty-first signal tower.

"You wish us to hide and attack at night," I said.

"On the contrary, you must attack by daylight, for it is essential that not a member of the embassy escapes under cover of darkness. At this point, a short distance from the highway, is an abandoned village where you will place your men. The watchman in the tower, as I said before, is one of ours, so there is no fear of his signaling an alarm.

"They leave Mummor at noon and should pass that tower between three and four hours later, making slow progress because of the oxen who carry the tribute. You will overcome them, don their garments, take their credentials, and continue on the road while the signal above you sets at 'All is well.' You are trained in soldiering, so Thoro informs me; therefore, I need not instruct you in the manner of accomplishing this feat."

"We had better be in concealment by daylight," I suggested.

"You will march to-night and arrive before dawn."

I could not afford to waste more thought on Murnova—who by now must be in the interior of some ferocious beast. Fortunate it was that the madness she felt for me was not reciprocated, for it might have destroyed my judgment in my first great endeavor.

I spent the rest of the day considering my plan of campaign, questioning Perath particularly regarding Tathe, whom I would impersonate at the court of Negor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SURPRISE ATTACK.

I MUST confess that I was a little disappointed at the plan, for I had expected something more subtle from the brotherhood. It was very possible there would be in the royal palace some person familiar with the person of Tathe who might betray us and ruin all. Yet I had been trained in obedience and was ready to do as had been arranged. But in my own mind I determined, should I be denounced before the king, to plunge at Negor and slay him if it was my last mortal act.

After all, that would settle the usurper as effectually as overthrowing him in battle, and I considered my own life of no consequence once my father was avenged.

A few hours after darkness fell a slave reported that men were entering the forest and approaching the fire of blue green. If they continued right through they would be my recruits and no others, as the unearthly glow would terrify any not in the secret.

Within an hour all were assembled and then Perath, bearing my armor and arms, came to me in the tree. There was a breastplate of fine bronze and a cap of the same metal, a buckler shaped like a triangle of wood and many thicknesses of leather; but what made my eyes glitter was the sword of gray metal which Thoro had promside me and a long spear tipped with the same extraordinary substance. I tried the blade; sure enough, it bent and sprang back into place, uninjured by the pressure. It was lighter than bronze, more easily wielded, and its advantage in a duel with the stiffer metal was obvious to me.

"Come now, I want your soldiers to meet their captain," he declared, smiling at my enthusiasm.

We left the hollow tree—which I never entered again, nor did ever I set eyes upon the face of Perath after my departure from that place.

By the fitful light of the weird fire I inspected my small army, and I was delighted to see that all were of the rank of nobles or citizens, not a slave among them—stout fellows, well armed with swords and javelins. A dozen carried bows with quivers filled with arrows. These regarded me silently, perhaps disappointed to see that I was a youth in years, although I was the tallest and broadest man among them.

"Brothers," said Perath, "this is Pagneomon, Prince of Azoria, whom Thoro has appointed to conduct this enterprise. The curse of Magor upon any among you who fail him in the fight."

Then they gave me the salute of a general—both arms, with weapons, held high above the head.

"Cathor!" cried Perath.

A man of thirty, dark and graceful, stepped forward.

"Cathor will be your second in command," said Perath. "Negor has slain his parents. He, also, has a blood oath against the false king."

I saluted Cathor, then stepped to his side and passed my arm over his shoulder.

"Negor slew my father," I told him. "For five years I have been waiting the chance for revenge. I welcome you as a brother."

"I welcome you likewise, Pagneomon," he replied.

"Fenthe!" cried the old priest.

From the ranks came a second man, younger than Cathor and shorter, but sufficiently sturdy.

"Fenthe," said Perath, "is my nephew. He will guide you and give the password to our friend in the signal tower. All your men are tried and devoted. You may trust them as yourself."

Then Perath kissed me on the forehead as a signal of farewell. Fenthe led the column to a line of buthoms made fast to trees and pointed to a magnificent bird whose head reared upward nearly twice the height of a man. I touched him at the knee joint and he bent his long legs so that I was able to swing upon his back; the company followed me and mounted, and then Fenthe led the way into the darkness, I close behind, Cathor behind me, and the others in single file.

For hours we traveled swiftly under the trees by a path known only to Fenthe, which caused us to circle Mummor without once coming in sight of its walls. Finally we struck the

king's road and then moved into marching formation, five birds abreast, so that any peasant who saw us pass might suppose us a royal patrol.

There was danger of encountering an actual patrol of soldiers, but it was only an hour before dawn, and I hoped we would not meet such a party. If it happened, why, we must overpower every man of them. We passed, one after another, the tall, slender towers of the signal system, unchallenged and most likely unnoticed, for the watchmen slept at night, since their messages could be sent only by daylight.

Dawn was breaking when we reached our destination and swung off the road to the cluster of ruined huts where we were to lie in hiding. There we quickly made ourselves invisible. When it was daylight I doffed my arms and armor and walked out alone to study the situation, which presented many problems. There was much traffic on the king's road, and there ought to be no witnesses to our encounter.

Furthermore, should there be cowards among the enemy, who turned tail at once upon our attack, how could I prevent them from flying to Mummor to tell the fate of the ambassador? If they managed to reach one signal tower the damage would be done.

After some consideration I determined to post a dozen men in a house which was situated a hundred paces from the village and near the road, in the direction of Mummor—a house which seemed to be inhabited, since smoke was coming through a hole in the roof. At a signal, these should sally out and guard the road, cutting off any one who attempted to fly.

I decided to send a half dozen men ahead when I should see the enemy approaching, whose business it would be to stop all traffic and turn it back in the name of the king. This would leave me thirty-six men for my main body, not including myself. I then inspected the signal tower and saw there was room at the top for three or four of my archers, who could pick off the enemy in comparative safety.

The dispositions arranged in my mind, I returned to the central hut, where I had established my headquarters, and discussed them with my lieutenant and guide. It still seemed to me that the attack should have been set at night, but probably this was the only signal tower in our hands and the enemy would not consult us regarding the time of his arrival.

Remembering my studies of the strategy of our ancient generals, I knew that my business was to keep out of the fight and direct the operations. But I also knew that I was not yet tried in battle, that these men would consider me a coward if I shirked fighting and might lose courage without a bold leader. I decided, therefore, that I must first win a reputation as a powerful warrior before I dared attempt to be a great general.

Indeed, I was also eager to try my sharp gray sword in actual battle, to hurl my spear against an enemy, and I was very glad that good judgment also advised me to take a leading part in the fray.

Nevertheless, this was not a contest where we must overcome the enemy; we must exterminate them, for if one escaped we were lost. Even if a peasant or passing traveler brought news to Luth or Mummor of the assault upon the ambassador, we were also ruined. Fortunately for our cause, there was a slight depression of the plateau at this spot; this would render the mêlée less likely to be seen from a distance. To overcome this depression the signal tower was higher by the height of two men than those to east and west, and it was most desirable that the battle be waged very close to the tower for this reason.

I wished there was some way we might swoop upon the enemy, but there were no riding places save the ruined huts, and the appearance of a strong band from these quarters might cause Tathe to take to flight and overpower the dozen men who would attack him from the rear.

So I planned to sally forth at first with but ten men, so that the enemy might be encouraged to scorn us; then, when we were engaged with them, the remainder of my force would ride down upon them, spreading to take them on both flanks. Although there were flaws in my plan of battle, I could think of no better.

Shortly after the sun was at its height we ate our food, quaffed some wine, and discussed the coming fray; and my lieutenants were not slow in commending my dispositions and to admit that they would have thought of nothing but sallying forth in one body.

Fenthe, as I have said, commanded the dozen who hid to the west in the single house; and Cathor would come forth at the head of those who would follow the first body, led by myself. My archers were already in the tower —at least four of them hidden upon the top of it—and all was prepared.

At the proper time I sent off a half dozen to halt traffic coming from Luth to Mummor, and then we waited impatently for our prey. A cloud of dust betrayed their approach, and presently we saw them coming.

First rode five soldiers, mounted, careless and unsuspicious, for there was no war in Luth and no robbers strong enough to attack such a body. Then came Tathe, upon a huge buthom of white, accompanied by a woman, who rode on a smaller bird beside him. Followed a half dozen oxen, dragging wagons, and in the rear were a dozen soldiers in three ranks, all mounted.

I feared lest they investigate the old house in which my dozen, with their mounts, were concealed, but they ignored it and moved on toward us. We had led our birds out of the houses and placed them close to the walls farthest from the approaching enemy, while the second party waited within the houses, standing beside their birds, ready to lead them out and mount as soon as I had charged.

I gave the word and swung upon my buthom when the force that Tathe led was twenty paces from the tower, and they spied us as my bird came out from the shelter of the old house. A trumpet sounded and the procession halted instantly, while Tathe peered to see who approached. If they turned now, abandoned their cattle and dashed back over their path, they could have cut through my rear guard and escaped; but, seeing only half a score approach, and considering, perhaps, we might be emissaries of Negor, they merely put themselves in a position of defense, those behind the oxen dashing forward to surround Tathe, and then we were upon them.

Ere we closed came the swish of arrows from above, and two fell from their birds, while a third dropped to the ground as his mount was slain. With a shout I hurled my heavy spear and rejoiced to see it pierce cleanly the buckler of a soldier and penetrate his body; then with my gray sword I was exchanging blows with another, while around me my men were dealing heavy strokes.

We were outnumbered. I heard Tathe crying to cut the robbers down, and his entire force crashed against us. But now came my second division, following instructions to the letter, coming at them from both sides of the road and turning the odds against them. No longer could our archers in the tower discharge their arrows, because we were intermingled; but we needed them no more. My long gray sword was knocking men from their

saddles; I had recovered my spear and was using it manfully, and we were cutting our way close to Tathe. He was trying to protect the woman and so far had avoided a foe.

I felt a sharp prick where a man on the ground had jammed his sword into my thigh, and I cut him down with one sweep of my blade. And then I came face to face with the ambassador, a powerful man in armor of gold and silver, wearing a short blond beard.

"Perish, pirate!" he cried, driving at me with his spear, which I turned off deftly with my buckler. My own spear I had thrown again, but I beat at him with my sword—one, two, three clashes of iron against bronze, and his sword broke. Then I ran him through the neck, and with a sharp cry he died.

As he fell I saw a man of mine aim a stroke with a sword at the woman who cowered upon her buthom, and at the moment I saw the woman's face. It was Murnova! I managed to interpose my buckler between her and the blow intended for her head, swung her off her bird in front of me, covering her still with my shield, and then I saw that all the enemy were down. And, obedient to orders, though they must have chafed to join in the fray, I observed my rear guard drawn up in a line across the road behind.

"Quick now!" I shouted. "Clear this road. Remove all bodies to the huts. Drag the dead birds out of sight. We must be on our way in fifteen minutes."

I had no time to marvel at the reappearance of Murnova by the side of Tathe, the ambassador to King Negor, richly robed, apparently his guest of honor, nor had I time to question her.

My men were already obeying my orders. The body of the chief was taken to the nearest hut, where his armor was torn from him and bound upon me, Murnova helping in the task. I scorned his weapons, but the armor was so rich I thought it necessary to wear it for appearance's sake.

In a very short space of time I had twenty men arrayed like the train of Tathe. As we had the advantage of surprise, only five of our men were slain, and the remainder I ordered to dig a trench and bury the followers of the ambassador, after the men who were only wounded had been dispatched. Cathor then touched me on the shoulder.

"'Twas wonderfully achieved, Pagneomon," he said gravely. "Yet one remains alive to betray us. Why did you save the woman?"

In truth, it did not please me to kill a girl, and even had I not recognized this one as Murnova, I might have thrust my buckler before her, anyway, to turn away the sword thrust. Recognizing her, I had protected her instinctively. Now I regarded her sternly.

"How comes it," I demanded, "that you ride forth to Luth beside your enemy? And how does it happen you fled from the tree of safety where I placed you a few nights ago?"

Murnova fell at my feet and kissed my knees.

"I can explain all, lord!" she cried. "I swear it is not my fault."

"Pagneomon," said Cathor, "were not our orders to slay all in Tathe's company?"

"I shall answer for this woman," I replied coldly. "Get you about the business of our departure."

In half an hour the train of Tathe was again moving toward Luth in exactly the same order as it had approached the signal tower. Meanwhile my patrols ahead had released traffic, and we began to pass merchants and travelers, mounted and afoot or in wagons, who scurried to the side of the road as they recognized our importance.

The men I had left behind, after they had accomplished their tasks, removed all vestiges of the combat, buried the dead far enough from the road so that the work they were about would not be spied upon, had orders to disband and return to Mummor as they had crept out of it.

My wound in the leg was bandaged and concealed by the long silver tunic of Tathe. Cathor had a slight wound in the arm, but the others who accompanied me were whole. It would not do for us to arrive at Luth covered with wounds, as we had no wish to have it known that we had encountered hostiles.

Since Murnova had left Mummor accompanied by Tathe, it seemed proper that she should arrive in Luth in the same company, and she appeared to rejoice in the change in the personality of the ambassador.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBASSADOR.

AND now, Murnova," I said at last, "please to relate how it happens that you cross my path again. How did you disappear from the forest, and why disobey my orders? I am very angry with you."

She gazed at me, tears in her blue eyes, her mouth quivering with pain.

"Turn your wrath from me, lord," she pleaded. "Forgive me."

"When I have heard your explanation, perhaps," I said coldly.

"There was something in that tree," she said, "which I heard creeping stealthily toward me, and in fright I dropped to the ground and ran toward the blue-green fire, despite your orders, to implore you to protect me. I had not gone far when terrible cries resounded, and suddenly I saw a line of human skeletons which glittered and gleamed in the darkness, the most horrifying sight my eyes ever beheld. I turned about and ran back in great haste, for I feared the creatures had slain you; but I could not find the tree nor my buthom. I ran on and on, for hours, while I heard savage beasts howling around me, and finally I must have dropped from exhaustion upon the ground. I woke to find a hunter bending over me, and it was morning.

"He threw me over his shoulder and carried me to a hut where were other hunters, among them Tathe himself, who recognized me and demanded what had happened to my father. I told him that we had been attacked by beasts in the forests which had killed my father, but that I had escaped and wandered for days. That caused him to declare he would protect me, now that my father was dead. He carried me back to Mummor, hid me in his palace, and, after he had taken leave of Zuthor and started upon his mission, he stopped at his palace, brought me forth, and carried me out of the city. We had been several hours on the route when you came out of that ruined village and attacked us. At first I flattered me that you were coming to my rescue, but now I know it is not so. After all, you do not love me like that."

I was silent while I considered her story, which seemed to me to have the weight of truth. My orders were to slay all in the train of Tathe for our own protection, but this could not include Murnova. Had not Perath assured me that he would assist her and sent his men forth to find her and bring her to the hollow tree? It was possible that a young girl, left alone in a haunted forest in the dead of night, might run for hours in her fright and finally stumble upon the camp of a noble who was hunting. And she was so beautiful that it was very probable Tathe had fallen in love with her.

Again it was an embarrassment to

have her on my hands, and Cathor, I knew, considered her with hostile intent. Others of my men, who understood how we might be ruined by a babbling female, might wish to slay her.

Yet slay the innocent child I could not do. I determined to extend my protection to her still, to introduce her boldly into Luth just as Tathe had proposed to do; in fact, it was really a benefit to us that the woman had turned out to be Murnova, since the signal towers had undoubtedly passed along the news that Tathe carried a woman in his company. Had she been devoted to Tathe we must have slain her and perhaps risked destruction by failing to arrive in Luth in her company. Murnova, loyal to me, was one of our guarantees of being the original embassy.

Calling forward Cathor, I presented him to Murnova, explained the circumstances of our acquaintance, and how fortunate it was for us to have her devoted to our interest, since we would now enter Luth exactly as Tathe had left Mummor.

Her beauty made an impression upon the man, and his face relaxed as he talked with her; so I saw that he would make no further trouble.

Opening the letter which I had taken from the wallet of Tathe, I found it to be a fulsome profession of loyalty to King Negor. Tathe desired the king to confirm him in the governorship of Mummor, which he had usurped to prevent the king's cousin from raising the province against the new king. He also included a list of the presents which were intrusted to the ambassador—a vast quantity of jewels, gold, cloths rich in gems, precious metals, valuable paintings, works of art, the pick of the contents of the palaces of the dead governor of Mummor and his leading adherents, who had been slaughtered with him.

It irked me to be compelled to convey this treasure to the vile king, and I was disgusted at the character of Zuthor, who thus fawned at the feet of the murderer of his liege lord, hoping that the other murderer would condone his horrible crimes. Nevertheless, I would present his letters and turn over the loot to Negor in the hope of carrying out my own purpose; but I promised myself that I would personally attend to the punishment of the meaner criminal in good time.

My Uncle Garthe would be close to the throne of Negor when I presented myself, perhaps also Baruth, my cousin, now almost a man, and there was a chance that these might recognize me and denounce me. But I had lived so strangely and developed in such an extrordinary manner during my years at the caves that they might not know me, particularly as I no longer bore much resemblance to my lamented father, except in my stature and the breadth of my shoulders.

Aunt Fedrath, of course, expected me; and Gella, if she were at the court, might be sharp enough to discern her cousin in the Ambassador Tathe; but I thought my aunt could manage her.

The princess royal had seen me but once and she was then a small child, so I did not consider her as a danger at all. These things were, after all, in the hands of Fate. If recognition came I hoped it would be when I stood within a few feet of the throne; I knew what I should do then.

We were now entering the more thickly settled section of the plateau and encountering bodies of soldiers, who made way for us graciously, and time-serving lords and gentles who saluted us cordially. Of course, our departure from Mummor had been heralded by the signal system and we were expected. I saw nothing in the attitude of those we met to indicate that the destruction of Tathe and his men

and our impersonation of them had been discovered.

We spent the night in the city of Guthmor, an important place surrounded with walls and housing some thirty thousand people. It was an army post where some ten thousand royal soldiers were quartered in barracks just inside the walls, and I inspected its defenses carefully as we entered, for it was a place I must take if ever I marched with an army against Luth.

We were quartered at the castle of a lord named Hechor, a fellow whom I recognized as having been present at the banquet given by my uncle five years before, but who evidently accepted me as the person I was supposed to be. He assigned us to chambers and I went to mine.

Certain of the nobles of Atlantis at that period wore beards or mustaches, and I wished I had some such covering for my face; but I shame to admit that my beard was very slight and it would take many weeks to grow whiskers long enough to conceal my chin. In the caves I had always removed the hair, hoping, by frequent shaving, to strengthen my beard; but as yet it had not shown much promise. I contemplated my face in a burnished-copper mirror and considered distorting it by a scar, and perhaps would have done so if we were not so near Luth that an unhealed scar would cause questions.

Finally I laid me down upon my couch and slept without a dream until I was awakened by Murnova, who had come into the room. When I started up, she laughed and pointed to the window, through which the sun was already pouring.

"Lord," she said, "strange things have happened regarding which you have told me nothing. For what reason did you slay Tathe and put upon yourself his raiment? Why do you carry his letters and continue on his mission as though you were a man who is dead?"

I considered what I should tell the woman. Thoro had frequently warned me of the looseness of the tongues of females, how often they had unwittingly betrayed their men by careless speech; yet this one had become one of the actors in my play and it was necessary that she know something.

"Because I wish to be considered as Tathe and to perform his mission for him," I said at length. "My reasons are not your affair, Murnova, and your business is not to betray me. You departed from Mummor in the train of the ambassador; therefore, it is necessary that you enter Luth as though you were still in his company. A word from you would cause my destruction and that of my friends. Yet I have trusted you and have not slain you. Now go and fetch me food and drink, after which I shall pay my respects to our host and continue on our route."

The girl left the chamber, to return shortly with dried fish, bread, and wine, upon which I broke my fast and gave some to her.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE PALACE OF THE KING.

HALF a day's journey from Luth there awaited us a detachment of one thousand mounted soldiers, whom I regarded with distrust until their commander rode forward and saluted me. He said he was sent as an escort of honor from Negor for the ambassador of his friend and loyal servant, Zuthor, and his troops closed in ahead and behind our little band.

As I had feared they might have been sent to destroy us, this was good news indeed; but the commander now rode by my side, which prevented my having further speech with Murnova, who dropped back and rode with Cathor. I heard him chatting with

her and the pair of them laughing together.

The sight of the walls of the great city recalled my last entry there in the company of my revered father and with what joyous anticipation I had passed through the gates.

From the walls trumpets sounded. Troops assembled at the entrance, raised their spears high in salute while we passed through. All the terraces were lined with people, who threw flowers down upon us as we passed along the avenue below. Because the city was bright with banners and all seemed in holiday dress, I demanded the cause of the officer by my side.

"They are celebrating the wedding of the king to the Princess Arsinhœa," he said, "which takes place in three days."

"They seem to love Negor much," I said.

The officer glanced at me from the corners of his eyes and smiled queerly.

"All are loyal," he said. "Negor is a great king and the princess is very beautiful."

Now I smiled, for I remembered the princess, and the thought of the chubby, plain, red-headed, arrogant child being so described amused me. Yet I was too shrewd to make a comment of any sort.

"Your coming also is cause for rejoicing," added the soldier. "His majesty feared trouble with Mummor and the outlying provinces, and even the overthrow of the royal governor did not necessarily mean that Mummor would declare for the king. Now that Zuthor bends the knee and sends you as the bearer of his submission and his gifts, the people of Luth rejoice that there will not be a civil war."

"Had my lord been disaffected to Negor," I said, "surely a rebellion in Mummor would not have alarmed the capital. The king's army might easily have taken the city."

"Yes, if all were loyal and if great numbers of the citizens of Luth itself did not take the field for the new king."

"But is it possible that there can be disaffection in Luth?"

"Nothing of consequence; but you know that the change in the dynasty was rather sudden and—er—violent."

Regarding him sternly, I said:

"Your remark might be construed as almost disloyal, sir."

"Not at all, lord," he said hastily. "None is more loyal than I, nor have I criticism of any sort. I am stating that we are all rejoiced because Mummor feels as does Luth regarding our new king."

"That is well," I said coldly.

And now we came to the great square in the center of which rose the glorious palace, the most wonderful building the world has ever seen or ever shall see. It gleamed white against the sky, its towers soaring majestically, one upon another, its walls manned with troops. The square was almost filled by the army, buthoms and footmen, and by the populace which appeared at the window openings of all the houses round about.

We approached the great gate, which was a gigantic block of stone set in front of a small opening in the wall, and so placed that no machines or battering-rams could ever force it inward; in fact, it was as easy to make a breach in the great wall as in the gate.

Yet, as the trumpets sounded, a vapor engine, of a type which I could not discover, because it was concealed, caused this great square stone to rise in the air to a height which enabled mounted men to ride in four abreast until they came to the inner door; then they passed within two by two. I saw that the great stone might easily be dropped upon those clustered before the inner portal if the captain of

the gate felt so inclined, and so wide was the stone that twenty mounted men would be crushed by it. However no such purpose was now intended, and we passed within the walls.

I have related that it was five hundred paces from the wall to the houses of the city on the far side of the square, and now it seemed to me that the courtyard of the palace was as great in extent. Yet it was filled with gorgeously arrayed attendants of the king—footmen, who wore long robes, some groups red, some blue, some green, each company commanded by a noble on his bird, and all armed with long spears from which hung the royal pennant of white and gold.

Through this multitude we proceeded which the royal orchestra played us a welcome, and then we entered the great door of the castle and stood within a huge circular hall, which was filled with women as well as men.

I looked eagerly for the king on his throne, but he was not there. Glorious as was this pageant, we were not yet in the presence of the monarch. Instead came forward my Uncle Gathor, looking very old and worn, but wearing a glorious robe of white, heavy with gold serpents and extinct beasts, bearing in his hand a long white staff. This was unfortunate. My uncle must have become a very high official of the palace and might recognize me before I reached the ruler. However, I saw that his eyes were bleared and he seemed to see with difficulty.

"Welcome, Tathe, ambassador of the loyal city of Mummor," he said in his well-remembered voice. "I pray you follow me. Slaves have already removed from your ox carts the gifts you bear from the devoted governor of your city. Your company will be cared for here below."

The women of the court were very bold and made remarks about my personal appearance, flattering because they were intended for my ear, as I followed my despised relative across the great hall.

At the rear we began to ascend, not a staircase, for, except in the high towers, there was none in the palace, but an inclined plane which led upward to the floor above. Here were housed officials of the palace and their families in hundreds of wedge-shaped apartments, and many slaves here moved about the exterior circular corridor. We ascended another inclined plane to the third floor, where we found the king and the highest nobles.

Around the royal audience chamber ran a circular corridor with planes leading always upward, but my uncle conducted me to a brazen door exquisitely carved and hit it with his staff. Immediately it was opened and music was heard.

I can close my eyes now and see that throne room, with its glorious dome entirely of gold and jewels of many colors. We walked upon rare silks, through a lane of soldiers which extended across the room to the throne of Atlantis.

The soldiers were all stalwart men who were armed, not with spears, but with silver axes, and costumed all differently in armor of gold and silver and of bronze painted red, yellow, blue, and green; and behind them was a throng of men and women brilliantly arrayed—the court.

The king sat upon his high throne—a marvelous throne, indeed. It rested upon a series of semicircular platforms of marble, the lowest white, the second black, the third red, the fourth white, then black and red again. It was flanked on either side by life-sized figures of the great extinct beast who had a tail on both ends and long white tusks protruding from his mouth. These mighty statues seemed also to be of gold.

On the lower platform of the throne

were lines of axmen, three rows of them, presenting an impenetrable hedge to the persons admitted to audience. And high above them, on the throne of the world, sat the murderer, Negor, who looked down upon me with a sneering smile, as though he had read my thought of dispatching him as soon as I got into his presence.

Now I understood why Thoro had rebuked me when I rashly boasted that I would avenge both my father and the king by slaying the assassin as soon as I got near him. No human being could reach the throne and the person of the brute who sat there.

Negor sat alone on the double throne, the great gold chair from which Atlantis had been ruled for thousands of years. He wore the robe of peacock tails, and upon his head was the towering, gem-studded, pointed crown, from the peak of which rose the red, mushroom-shaped feather of the Marnuma, an extinct bird of Atlantis which had been bigger than the buthom and which had not lived in Luth for at least two thousand years. This royal feather had been preserved through a line of a hundred kings, no less.

Hating myself, I lay prostrate upon the marble floor, and waited until my enemy should give the word for me to rise. My disappointment was sharp. Secretly I had almost hoped for recognition, so that I might slay and then sell my life as dearly as possible. There sat the beast, hedged in by weapons. Ranged on either side were picked troops who, at the first sign of hostility, would fall upon me and cut me into a hundred pieces.

He sat among his friends, his court, his devoted followers; but he trusted them not. No person in that hall had any better chance than I of reaching his breast with a weapon, and I had none.

"Welcome, Tathe, friend of my friend," said the king. "I had word of your coming. I know the loyalty of your master. I commend him for his courage in overthrowing my enemies in Mummor, and I shall send back by you the order which confirms him as governor of the city. Gathor, take from Tathe the letters he bears for me."

Rising, I turned over to my uncle the letters. Gathor reached the first platform of the throne, where the captain of the guard took the letters from him, carried them up, and laid them at the feet of the king, who did not deign to read them.

"Greeting, mighty monarch," I said in answer to his salutation. "I have placed at your feet the city and province of Mummor."

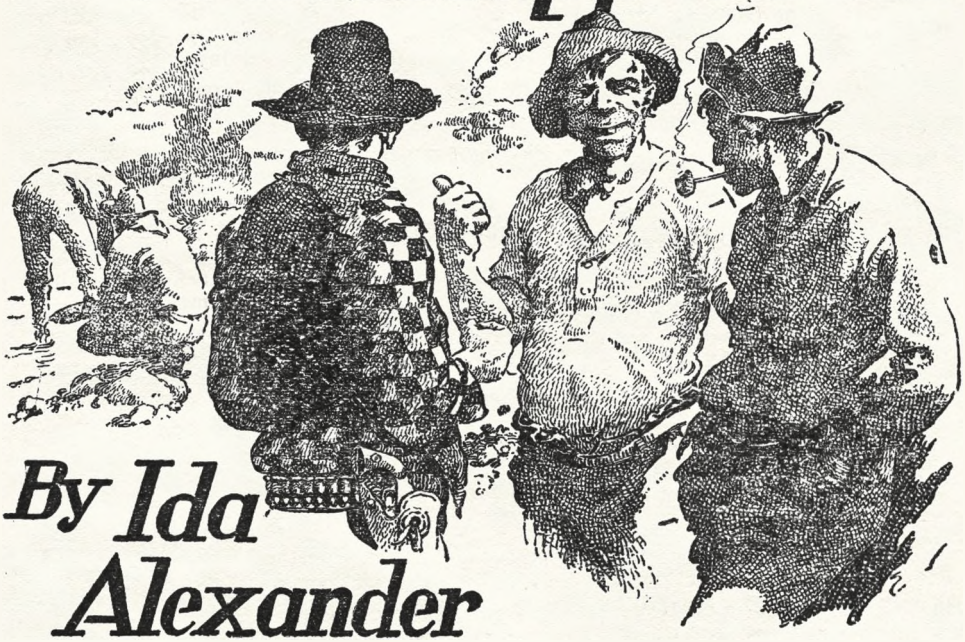
"You have done well, Tathe," replied the king. "You and your people will be lodged in the palace until after my marriage with the Princess Arsinhœa; then I shall deliver to you a message for your master. It is my desire that the princess receive the gifts from Mummor as her own."

Immediately the music began to play; then the wall at the rear of the throne opened as if by magic, and through the opening there came a young woman.

Although it is now some eighty years since that moment, I can see, as distinctly as if I were standing at the foot of the great throne, looking upward, the most dazzling and queenly creature who ever lived and loved, the rarest of flowers, the brightest of stars, the proudest and sweetest of spirits—Arsinhœa, the Queen of Atlantis and my love.

To be continued next week.

The Grasshopper-Ant



By Ida Alexander

Mike Caton was too darn generous, that was all there was about it. Year after year he would say that this time, he was going to lay up money for the winter—and each time he'd help out some unfortunate, and go broke. He was the despair of those who liked him.

YEAR after year Mike Caton had made the same boast. Year after year it had proved an idle one. Every one in Tuolumne County knew about it and was certain how it would turn out.

They laughed about it among themselves. But it was a serious thing to Mike. His annual failure had no effect upon him. No last year's experience ever shadowed the year in which he lived. Always he was certain that this was the time for dreams to come true.

He liked to gather a little group together in Sonora, Jimtown, or Hangtown and hold forth about his ambitions and the certainty of their fulfillment.

"B'ys," he'd tell them, drawing up till he towered above the tallest, "b'ys, here's how! Drink to me indepindince. Shure, I'll be like George Washington, come the ind of the year. I'll have me freedom. 'Tis long I been cravin' it. This year 'tis mine. I won't be haulin' logs over the mountains, wid thunder crashin' an' lightning an' rain in me face. Come winter once ag'in, an' I won't be there."

Here was the place for his impressive pause. The men listened, glasses full and high.

"No, I won't be haulin' logs this year," Mike would go on. "Drink, all o' ye, to me indepindince. Here's how!"

The glasses drained, Mike returned to

his subject. His fine blue eyes glowed. No one could doubt his sincerity. His voice was deep and earnest as he continued.

"I'll work this summer like divils was on me trail. I'll save ivery cint. An', come the winter, me an' the animal will crawl into the cabin, an' lick our paws like bears. The divil a tap we'll do till the spring comes round ag'in. 'Tis gintlefolk we'll be—hey, Banshee, me lass?"

Mike's bit of a dog, half spitz and wholly cur, fawned on him at the promise so often repeated. The old-timers listened to him, amused; the newcomers, impressed. There was always a tenderfoot or so to ask questions and enable Mike to harangue the crowd.

After the little group dispersed, or Mike had been ingloriously carried home, as was sometimes the case, the tenderfoot must be enlightened as to the skepticism of the others.

The tales they had to tell of Mike would have made a goodly volume. There was the time he had sent his whole season's earnings to the mother of a boy who had been killed in the woods, and the time he had nursed a stranger through typhoid, spending his money as freely as his strength. The time, too, he had waived his right to a claim with careless generosity. Times without number when the gold, gathered with the industry of the ant, had been used to finance carousals with the prodigality of the grasshopper.

Through all the jibing and jesting, as the tales were told, there ran an undercurrent of something deeper. They derided him and praised him with one breath. He was known from one end of Tuolumne to the other. No man was better loved.

"He's the great old Mike," one of the miners finished his tale. "A great old Mike, an' no mistake. But he'll never win out in the wide world. He just ain't got it in him."

"But why?" queried the latest tenderfoot, gazing enviously after Mike's giant stature. "He looks strong as a horse. Can't he dig, same's the rest of us? Seems no good to me, a man like that."

Several of the men started to speak. But the one who had spoken spoke first again, eying the tenderfoot with censure, mixed with pitying contempt.

"Son," he told him, "you got a powerful lot to learn. An' you come to the right country to learn it. They grow men here. Real men! They might even grow one of material like you. I don't know. But this I do know: you'll be growin' the rest o' your natural life 'fore you ever come up to Mike. An' likely not then."

Abashed, the tenderfoot soon took his leave. The half dozen men gazed after him. But it was not of him they thought or spoke.

"Poor old Mike!" one said. "There's skunks'll look at him jest like that. They'll judge him harsh—him that never was hard on no one."

"Not for long," put in Jed Tylorne. "Even that fool'll get to understand him before three months are past. But I wish the old boy could win out this time. If he could have his winter vacation for once, it'd be something to talk about for the rest of his days."

"It's just possible he'll surprise us yet," said Scotty, meditatively. "When a mon wants onything as much as Mike wants this, he keeps going after it."

"Oh, Mike'll go after it all right. Every year he'll try. But—you know how it is."

Scotty knew. They all knew. Yet, as time went on, they began to hope once more for the fulfillment of Mike's annual dream. He was working steadily and not spending much money. Wages never had been as good. His visits to Hangtown, Jimtown, even tc Sonora, were infrequent. Better still, when he came he did not linger.

"Shure, 'tis the whole winter'll be mine," he told them. "For why should I be after hangin' around, wastin' me time now? Ye can't lick yer paws like a bear summer an' winter, too. An' summer's the time for work. Come winter, now, I do be longin' for shilter. I hate rain like an ould pussy cat. An' 'tis this year, b'ys, the animal an' me won't be after facin' it. Shure, we'll be safe an' snug."

"You stick right to it, Mike," they encouraged him. "Don't be a fool. Stay right by your job an' the money it brings."

"A postage stamp'll stick no closer to a letter than me to me job," he promised. "Wo-r-r-k! I eat it up. Whin the timperature is way up in G, 'tis so me stringth is. I want to be workin' ivery minute of ivery day. 'Tis in the winter that it goes agin' me. 'Tis thin I ache to be done wid the steady draft."

"Well, mind your eye, then," Jed cautioned him. "Take care o' what you make. Look out some one don't pluck you, as they've often done before."

Mike drew himself up.

"Pluck me!" he said. "I'd like to see the man that'd try it. No man ain't done that yit."

"Pshaw!" Jed scorned him. "They've plucked you like a chicken again and again. There's no pin feathers in you, Mike. Yours come out easy. You're pleasant plucking, an' well worth the trouble."

"The divil a man's plucked me yit, I tell you. I'd like to see how they'd be after gettin' around me. There ain't a scheme I ain't onto. I'm wise to the gold brick, the salted mine, the beans an' the peas, the twinty-dollar piece that goes in before yer eyes an' out ag'in behind 'em. Don't ye worry, me brave lad. If they catch me sleepin' awake, I won't know it. 'Tis only so anny mother's son of 'em kin pluck me."

"They kin pluck you, feathers an' skin, by means of a hard luck tale," Jed told him. "Mind your eye an' your money bag, Mike."

"The divil a cint wan gets this time," vowed Mike. "I'd like to see how they'd be after gettin' around me. I been foolin' long enough. Now 'tis me an' the animal for shilter whin winter falls. An' I'll tinker a bit wid me old mine now an' thin, to kape the laze out o' me bones. Could I find that lost vein, now, 'twould be the pig's back I'd be on."

All through Tuolumne's scorching summer days, Mike toiled in the hay fields with a will. Jed and Scotty went out of their way more than once to make sure that his resolution still held. Always Mike was there, making child's play out of a giant's work. Always, off in the shade, Banshee dozed in comfort, or, waking suddenly, gave noisy warning of a stranger's approach. Sometimes Mike saw them, and waved his arms like a conqueror, or tossed a bale of hay up on the wagon to show how easy it was. Again they passed unnoticed.

"If he holds on for another month," Jed Tylorne told Scotty, "he'll be all right. He'll have made plenty by then to pay up all he owes an' grubstake himself an' Banshee for the winter."

"Mon, he means it this time," Scotty exulted. "I could see it in his eye the last time we held speech. And mark the way he kept away from the toons. That shows a bit, too."

"I never expected him to win out," said Jed. "An', of course, he ain't won out yet. But he's never held out this long before. It looks mighty good to me. I spoke a word to Daly, when the hayin' began, an' warned him to see no one pestered Mike into quittin'. I've seen him throw up a job that meant bread and butter at a word he didn't like."

"Hot-headed Mike is, and hot-headed

he always will be," said Scotty. "I cautioned them at the Wren Ranch and at McIntire's, as you did at Daly's. And the men walk around him like they were walking among eggs. He'll no' be leaving for the words of ony mon, far as I can see. Gin he holds it through this last haying and Browerthal's sacking, he'll be on the safe road and can take the comfort he desires."

"If no one gets it away, after he has it cinched up," sighed Tylorne.

But he had more faith than he ever had had before. The sigh went backward, rather than forward.

Every one was with Mike—hands, heads and hearts. More than once some one steered him safely past a place where dice rattled and liquor flowed like water. They devised many schemes for keeping his earnings intact. A delegation stood ready to escort him to the best provision store in Sonora, when the time to make his purchases came. Scotty and Jed Tylorne made a compact to see that the unhappy and unlucky did not cross his path.

"It's now or never," they said to one another, with grim lips. "If Mike loses out this time he'll never try again. This is his last throw."

Mike, on one of his few visits to town, confirmed this pessimistic belief.

"B'ys," he told them, "this is me wan chancst. I'm graspin' it, head an tail. Shure, I'll lick me paws like a bear this year, or niver. Whin things gits that narrow, a man has a care. I'm jest this way: what I sit me mind to do, that I do, though the divil wid horns an' tail confroonts me. 'Tis manny a year I been tryin' to carry this out. I do shrink in the winter from the iliments. An' ivery year I tried. But always an' always there did seem somethin' agin' me. Things is for me now."

"Then mind yer eye, an' follow them. Be for yourself for once, anyhow. 'Tis about time."

"For who else should I be?" inquired Mike. "'Tis so I always been. Would I be after changin' now, an' shilter for me an' the animal in sight? Ain't I craved jist for years an' years?"

But that was the last time that Mike talked freely of his winter quarters. Always he changed the subject with an evasive word, or a jest.

"What's come over old Mike?" Jed Tylorne wondered to Scotty. "He don't seem keen on talkin' any more about his winter vacation. Still, he keeps workin'——"

"When a mon's sure, he isn't so apt to boast," Scotty reassured him.

"Well, I ain't satisfied. It's like Mike to talk an' talk about what's in his mind. An' the next time I see him I'll ask him did he break into his row of iron men."

And the next time that he saw him, he did as he said. Mike hesitated, seemed to grow angry at the question, and then thought better of it.

"'Tis the divil a cint I spint but for necissities, payin' out, an' the like o' that," he averred. "I ain't give as much as a cint away, if that's what you're diggin' at."

And, although Jed knew that Mike would not lie, he felt far from satisfied.

The next day, walking past Browerthal's, on the way to their mine, neither Scotty nor Jed could see Mike. They could scarcely believe their eyes. It was the busiest time. Could Mike have become offended and quit? They asked Browerthal. But he could tell them nothing. There had been no trouble, no reason for leaving. Yet Mike had drawn his wages and quit, making no explanation. He had drawn all that was owing at the other ranches, they found, upon inquiry.

They looked at each other blankly. Then hastened their steps toward his cabin.

"Somethin' wrong!" panted Jed.

"Some one's got a hold of him. Come quick, 'fore he gives every cent away."

Mike was not in his cabin. There were evidences of a hasty breakfast—a breakfast for three; signs of sleeping quarters for the same number.

They took their way to Mike's mine. Mike emerged from it as they came up. Farther down, by the stream, two men were busied in panning out. Jed recognized them. One was the tenderfoot; the other a tenderer foot still. They looked satisfied and well fed.

"They been fattenin' on Mike!" groaned Jed. "He's put his money into things like them!"

Mike looked up and saw them. He came toward them, grinning sheepishly. "B'ys," he greeted them, "I was after comin' up to see yese the night. But ye bate me to it. Shure, 'tis glad I am to see ye."

"Mike," said Jed, without preamble, "what the hell 'a' you been doin'? What you want to be grubstakin' guys like that for? What call you got to do it?"

Mike put up a warning hand.

"Whist!" he said. "They might hear ye. Come away a piece."

They walked in silence to a place where they were out of earshot. Then Mike spoke.

"The lads was most starvin'," he explained, apologetically. "Shure, they wasn't built for hayin' at all, at all. They petered. An' didn't some wan have to be lookin' out for 'em till they got on their fate? Tell me, now: didn't some wan have to kape these brave lads afloat, if not for the sake o' their mither, for the memory o' his own?"

The Scotchman looked off into the distance and did not reply. But Jed spoke hotly:

"Somebody, maybe, ye damned old fool! But why you? You're a plain old grasshopper-ant. You save an' then throw away. You're a fool. Why couldn't they work like the rest of us? Ain't there plenty o' work? Was they too light to do heavy work, an' too heavy for light? Tell me that, now!"

"Aisy, aisy!" cautioned Mike. "Ef ye can't be aisy, be as aisy as ye can. Sound carries these still days. I wouldn't have them hear ye for a gold mine. I tell ye, they couldn't stand the hayin'. 'Twas so we became acquainted. An' they're fine lads, though shrimpy set up."

"But—Mike, yer little pile!" groaned Jed. "Every one so proud o' you an' everything. Feedin' them big hulks'll never help you to lick your paws like a bear this winter. Get rid o' them!"

Something in Mike's face turned Jed's face white with suspicion.

"Mike!" he cried. "How much ye got left o' your summer's wage."

"The pile is about gone," confessed Mike, cheerfully. "Though I told ye naught but the trut'. I ain't give none away, not a dollar, not a dime. But, shure these lads was to kape. An' fine appetites they have, God bless 'em! Then, there was their pay, as well. An' wages is good. Could I chate 'em, tell me, now? Could I have 'em count me a piker?"

"Oh, you damned fool!" Jed flared at him. "You great damned fool! You're plucked again. You'll always be. I'd like to lick ye, was I able."

"Ye ain't," Mike grinned, putting his hand caressingly on Jed's shoulder. "Ye ain't. Not by a domn sight. There ain't a man in Tuolumne kin do it. An', whist, me hasty fire eater, 'twas this bit o' news I was comin' to tell ye the night. Thim lads, they struck it for me. Beginner's luck! 'Tis the richest strike in manny a day, I'm tellin' ye. Loike demons they fought, the poor lads, an' they found where the old lost vein branched into one a t'ousand times as rich. So not only me, but thim an' ye, kin lick our paws loike a bear from now on, summer well as winter, do we so moind."

The Warder

By Calvin Johnston

THE night and the castle all were still,
Except the clock on the kitchen sill,
As the warder, shivering, half crouched down
To hold some warmth in his canvas gown.
'Twas little he recked that the moonset stain
Hung red in the arch of the frosted pane,
So that he saw by a bloody light
The snowbound waste of the Christmas night.
Nor recked at all of the lengthening chime
When the stupid jinn of the fates paged time.
For Dan o' the Mesa'd sure come through
To the castle warder of Dreams-come-true.

So, then, where the Tuscon trail turns down
Past the wreck of the old Pueblo town,
He came—behind him the burst of sparks
Which spells the last of a cowboy's larks.
At bar, at poker, or one mad whirl
With the jealous friends of a dancing girl.

A dash for the cabin, a laughing hail;
"Ho, kid, step up for the Christmas mail!
There's one of 'em down, kid, three to go——"
Like moonset shadows across the snow,
The chase swept past; and the boy laughed, too,
At the fate of the posse when Dan came through.

None saw the fall, nor carried the fight,
Save the hard old sheriff, high-gun that night,
Though only a lone horse stood there still
When midnight struck on the kitchen sill.

Some peppermints, and a woolly pup,
Who once lived hard and had been shot up;
A tiny slipper, a glossy curl.
"To Dan's kid pal"—from the dancing girl.
And, best, a stick with a broncho head.
So the horse it was that he took to bed.
And who's denyin' that hobby bay
Will round up Dan in a better day;
Or when so mounted he won't ride through
To his friend, the warder of Dreams-come-true?

By Carl H. Claudy

The Hard-Boiled EGG Assumes

After he escaped from the penitentiary, this lifer became so sure that he was the cleverest crook on earth, that he unwittingly laid for himself an unexpected trap. Such is life.

GOOD morning, Mr. Bowers! I am glad to welcome you back to Ashton! I wish you a successful career in the store!"

Banker Preston removed his hat and extended his hand.

The proprietor addressed looked out of a cold and fishy eye at the speaker. He was a large man, with a stoutness suggestive of massive bones and muscles, rather than of gross flesh. A close-cropped bulletlike head showed symptoms of being bald in a few years. The face was shot with little red veins, not as those of a drinking man, but as if the red blood beneath had no space under the tight skin and must needs break through.

The hand he slowly extended to the one put out toward him was large, pudgy fingered, hairy. A certain rugged genuineness seemed a part of him—not a man to trust for sympathy or affection, but certainly one to depend on in an emergency. A man obviously strong, but apparently more suited to the sterner sides of life than to the country store in which he stood.

"Thanks, Preston," he answered without heartiness. "But let's get started straight. Call me 'Ike,' or 'Bowers,' as you please; but if there's to be any handle on it, it's 'Sergeant.' They retired me only for the leg that ain't! I earned the title, and I propose to have it."

Mr. Preston glanced quickly about the store, apparently to see if any were

in earshot to hear him so admonished. It was the usual country store, prosperous in a modest way, shelves crowded with inexpensive goods, floor worn with the feet of years. It couldn't compare with the little bank, all polished mahogany and plate glass, and yet Banker Preston had walked over to greet the newcomer in his place of business. He but began a custom which was to become widespread: Sergeant Bowers came to no one; they came to him. Banker Preston's answer was almost eager:

"Why, certainly, sergeant! Ashton is very proud of your record!"

The word went quickly about the little town. It was "Sergeant Bowers" from then on. The word came easily from country lips; Ashton was excited about her returned police official, who had played so prominent a part in the catching of the notorious Gallinger gang, sacrificing a leg to one of their bullets.

Ashton basked in a reflected glory, and felt an intangible insurance against the presence of yeggs, robbers, thieves, murderers, and other wicked men. Speeders, chicken thieves, bootleg drunks and boys who stole garden gates on Hallowe'en, Ashton understood and could cope with.

Criminals of a harder type were practically unknown there; that they possessed a famous policeman, experienced with criminals, a man who had faced a dozen desperadoes single-handed and shot it out with them, finally effecting the capture of those he had not killed, was a real pride to the village.

The little general store had always been the mecca of the idling male population; now that Sergeant Bowers had purchased it, it became the civic center. The youth of the town gathered there to hear stories of the strange life of the great city. Their fathers collected in knots to discuss politics, the state of the nation, and to have the benefit of Sergeant Bowers' cosmopolitan viewpoint.

To be sure, Bowers often shocked their conventions; he seemed to regard his former profession in the light of hard work and common sense, rather than of romance. The younger men did not understand how he would be willing to give up his connection with the police, even though crippled.

"Couldn't you get a job at a desk, sergeant?" inquired Peter Kelsey, boy-of-all-work for the store.

"Sure. Offered me one! Inspector Grant said I could have any job in the department that didn't need two legs! But if I'm spry enough to do my job, I don't want any substitutes. Police have their pride, boy, same as common folks. I served my time, made my record, did my work. I'd be forgotten in a year at a desk. I'd rather be here." He looked at the big hand that had shaken so many frightened suspects. Now it held nothing more terrible than a pen.

Sergeant Bowers' career had brought him in contact with few people who entertained illusions. Ashton believed in "Sherlock Holmes" and "Raffles." Ashton believed that burglars wore black masks and carried dark lanterns and slunk along fences and said "Hist!" as they did in the motion-picture melodrama which came so often to the town hall.

Ashton thought that pickpockets were helpless if you carried your money in your vest, and that a watch guard was sufficient to foil any petty thief. Ashton believed that criminals were reformed in jail, and that justice was blind. Ashton knew nothing of a third degree, a framing, or a railroading. And no one heard anything from the big ex-bull as to the inside method of the modern police department.

He was no braggart. That was one of the things the town liked about him. Young George Henry had interviewed

him for the *Ashton Banner* the day after the new sign went up: "Sergeant Bowers, Metropolitan Store." But it was no fault of Sergeant Bowers that the "rising young journalist," as Mr. Preston called him, had made a hero-worshiping page spread of "our distinguished native son." Phrases like "Burglar Catcher Extraordinary." "Hero of the Force," and "Intrepid Protector of the Helpless," had not originated with the ex-policeman. He read it with a snort.

"I'll tell that whipsnapper ink slinger where he gets off. He can't make me out a fool, that way!" he stormed to Peter.

But friendly neighbors made him see that Ashton took the blurb seriously. The pastor asked him to speak to the Sunday school on the evils of modern life—which he declined on the grounds that he wasn't a speaker. The school superintendent consulted him as to some histories in which famous crimes were mentioned. The postmaster served him first, no matter how many were in line. Substantial citizens dropped in, ostensibly to make purchases, actually to ask his advice about a type of lock, or the best way to prevent a sneak thief from getting chickens. The station agent brought him his old Civil War revolver to ask if he should attempt to clean it himself or send it to the factory.

When the bank was robbed at Catonsville, county seat, Ashton so crowded the store that there was no room left for customers. They wanted to know who had committed the crime? Could he catch them? How was it done? Did he think they would come to Ashton? Mr. Preston asked him anxiously to examine the bank vault. Sheriff Cotton, who had held a little aloof, sensing a rival, frankly capitulated, begging for instructions as to what he should do if bank robbers came to Ashton.

Sergeant Bowers smiled. Ashton thought it a wise smile, as befitted an authority on crime and police methods. He answered the questions oracularly. Years of experience and a complete inside knowledge enabled him to point out what was real news and what was police inspired in newspaper accounts of crimes. He ventured a couple of prophecies as to whether certain suspects were guilty, or not.

Perhaps this information came privately by letter from Sergeant Kelly. "From my long experience," said he, drawing himself up, "I can tell you that Smithers isn't guilty of that crime. The real murderer is known to the police, and they are just holding Smithers as a witness. You'll see!"

When Ashton did see, it thought all the more of its general-store keeper's infallibility as a crime expert and his ability to protect them all from those who break in and steal. Tolbert Hanson, insurance agent, even talked about getting a reduction in burglary insurance premiums, on account of the protection which Sergeant Bowers was to the town.

Sergeant Bowers expanded under the adulation of his neighbors. An active-duty policeman in a great city counts a week lost time which brings no raid, holdup, gun fight or arrest of importance. Such men have little time to cultivate the softer pleasures of life. Whether the inspector occasionally patted Sergeant Bowers on the back or mentioned him in a report, he was rewarded.

Here every one patted him on the back and constantly deferred to him. He bought better clothes and strutted a little—as much as a man with a wooden leg can strut. Apparently, he did not lose his head; perhaps it was too hard for that. But he did appear to enjoy the respect and admiration of the simple folk, to whom, in spite of their kindness and adulation, he was so alien.

On June 21, 1922, the *Banner* carried a scare-head story of a sensational jail break from State prison. Two convicts, one a lifer, and one serving a one-year term, had made a successful break for liberty. The State police were out in force. Descriptions of the desperate characters were in all papers. The sheriff brought one to Bowers.

"I think you ought to have this, sergeant," he said. "All sorts of tourists stop through here—maybe you could catch them."

Sergeant Bowers smiled.

"Maybe I could, if they'd give me a chance. But neither Connors nor that Egg fellow will come here."

"Why won't they?"

"The lifer is already in the hands of his friends, hiding out in some city tenement!" Sergeant Bowers pronounced. "Friends of a one-year man don't try to help him escape. The Egg chap just helped Connors."

"But the 'Hard-boiled Egg'—why might he not come here?"

"Because we are on a side road; he'd stick to the main road."

That didn't seem likely, though.

"How come? That's the most traveled! He'd be lots more likely to be seen there, wouldn't he?"

"Where would you hide a grain of sand?" asked Sergeant Bowers. Without waiting for an answer, he went on: "On the seashore, of course. He's safer in a traveled road, where he is only one of many, than in a little town like this."

"But just suppose!" Peter, who gave indications of being romantic, asked his question in front of a store full, "just suppose, sergeant, he *did* come here! Suppose he should try to hold some one up—suppose he did come in here and hold us up—what would you do?"

"Humph!" Sergeant Bowers' voice expressed utter contempt. "I'd like to see him try it. He wouldn't be the first I'd have taken a gun away from. "His voice had no boastful inflections. It was a mere statement of fact.

"But suppose he didn't use a gun—suppose he murdered you with a club when you weren't looking?"

No one laughed. It was too serious a matter for laughter.

"What would I be doing while he was trying it?" The sergeant looked at his great hands, and his big body. "Even if I have only one leg, the rest of me isn't crippled, is it? I'll tell you, he won't come here!"

The comforting assurance went about the little town with the telegraphic speed which back-door mouth-to-ear gossip can produce. Sergeant Bowers was ready for him! Sergeant Bowers would catch him! Sergeant Bowers was much too much for any one, or any half dozen holdup men, crooks, thieves, murderers. Sergeant Bowers was unafraid —there was no reason why quiet Ashton could not sleep soundly in its bed.

Six hours after their escape, the Hard-boiled Egg shook hands with Sam Connors, lifer, in the bushes. They had hidden there until dark.

"Good luck, old-timer," he said. "I'm on my way."

"You damn sight better stick around with me. My girl's car will be here soon as it is dark——"

"No, I don't play the game that way. I've got clothes, thanks to your friends. I'll have money soon. Men assume that an escaped convict hides. That's why I'm not going to hide."

"You can't escape on assumptions!" grunted Sam.

"Oh, yes, you can. You can run a whole life on assumptions," returned the Hard-boiled Egg, airily. "You assume your foot won't slip when you put it on the pavement. If you didn't, you wouldn't be able to walk. If there is a banana peel there, you tumble because you didn't assume correctly.

Every one assumes a dollar bill is good; that's why a counterfeiter can shove the queer. Every one assumes that I'll run and hide; that's why I won't. Just be sure your assumptions are right, and you can get anywhere!"

"You didn't keep out of jail with assumptions, did you?" grinned Sam.

"I assumed my pal wouldn't snitch!" growled the Hard-boiled Egg. "I don't assume that, next time!"

"Look here, bo," Sam spoke earnestly, "I like you. You've done me a real service. Le'me tell you something. You assume too damn much. You can't beat the game on assumptions. You got to know! You'll assume they'll look for you in the city—but I know there'll be a car here that'll take you a long ways toward safety! Better come with me."

The Hard-boiled Egg grinned.

"I never made but one mistake, assuming what common sense and experience shows is so," he answered. "You don't owe me anything. This outfit is ample thanks. Just assume I know my own business——"

"You can't get away with it, assuming——" But the Hard-boiled Egg had turned and was already walking down the road.

"That's the trouble with these common crooks!" he sneered to himself. "They can't see anything but what's in front of their noses. The only way to beat the police is to know what they will assume and do the opposite!"

He had very definite plans. The first was to get some money. Without money a hunted man is helpless. With money he has as good a chance as he will make for himself, to avoid the net that is spread for him. Get money, take a train for a thousand miles away, buy into some business as far removed from the pool room he had kept before he did the job with the crooked pal; it was simple enough. He had some education, he knew life, he had learned much in his six months in prison, as how to avoid the bulls, what to do on the outside to avoid suspicion. All he needed was money.

The Hard-boiled Egg had no conscience as to how he got money. It had only to be a safe way. No stick-up, no safe robbing, no woman's pocketbook to be snatched. A till in some small store, just before closing—that was the easiest way. He felt in his pocket for the small life preserver Sam had been thoughtful enough to have his friends provide, together with the very good suit of dark clothes, yellow shoes and nifty tie he wore.

Poor Sam! Probably be caught in a week, for he assumed too much for his own cleverness and not enough for the cleverness of the police. He was going to do exactly what the police would assume he would do—hide in the city. Well, it was none of the Hard-boiled Egg's business.

The Hard-boiled Egg sauntered along the road slowly enough to reach Ashton after dark. Ashton, he knew, was not small enough to be dangerous; a stranger could be seen there without suspicion.

"They'll assume I'm a tourist," he told himself. "Now, I'll hunt some money——"

He walked around the little town, looking it over. The bank he rejected at once as a possibility. It was closed, of course, and he had no tool with which to break into it. A feed store he discarded as not having enough money in sight. The pool room, he knew by experience, would not have any large sum in the cash register, if it had a cash register. But when he came to the general store he knew he had found the place where he might "earn some dough."

It was a typical country store—two long and crowded counters displaying a mixture of all possible and many impossible brands of merchandise, tobacco,

calico, buckets, canned goods, tools, seeds, provisions, kitchen wear, dishes, rakes, hoes, hats, coats, overalls, boots, needles and thread, machine oil, automobile sundries, anything, everything. A third counter ran across the back of the store, behind which was a little office. The store was lighted with two large electric bulbs, in old-fashioned kerosene ceiling lanterns. The Hard-boiled Egg was glad; they were easy to put out.

A lame man the Hard-boiled Egg took to be the storekeeper, and a boy, were getting ready to close up. The Hard-boiled Egg was somewhat nonplused at the sight of two; he had hoped for a lonely merchant. But the boy didn't keep him long in suspense. He left the lame man at ten o'clock promptly. The Hard-boiled Egg watched him cross the quiet street and disappear down its dim length. Ashton is an early-to-bed village and most of the houses were already dark. Then he put his hand on the little life preserver, and went into the store to make a purchase. He didn't know just what it would be—whatever was for sale at the far end.

As he entered he looked quickly—neckties. A rack full of them on the glass case at the end. He pulled his own tie quickly awry.

"Have you some neckties? This one won't tie right——"

"Yes, I've some ties—good ones, too. We get a lot of tourist trade, so I keep city goods."

He hobbled to the end of the store, the Hard-boiled Egg at his side. The merchant went behind the counter.

"I'd like to see that one!" The Hard-boiled Egg pointed in the case. To get it the storekeeper had to stoop down behind the counter. As he did so, the Hard-boiled Egg reached over and struck—only once, and with that nicety of touch which long experience had given.

The victim slumped to the floor without a sound. The Hard-boiled Egg turned and walked slowly to the door; no, there was no one in sight. He closed the door, gently, reached up and pulled the chain from the old-fashioned lights; the store was in darkness.

The Hard-boiled Egg took a hundred and eleven dollars and forty cents from the cash drawer, cursing that it was no more. In pale radiance from a feeble street lamp through the window, he contemplated the fallen man. No blood showed—he had not disgraced his skill.

"I can safely assume it will be at least an hour before you'll be able to give the alarm," he whispered aloud. "Any one who passes will assume the store is closed and locked; no one will come in and find him. All I have to do is to get transportation——" He felt the money in his pocket with satisfaction, and slipped out into the dark and silent street.

The Hard-boiled Egg did very well with his nest egg. His assumptions that the police would not at first hunt for the escaped convict in the smaller towns must have been correct. He managed to get a thousand miles away without any suspicion.

Following his doctrine of ascertaining what the popular assumption would be and then going with it or against it as circumstances dictated, he chose a new oil field as a good place to hide out. Who would assume that the luxury-loving Hard-boiled Egg would be in cowhide boots, blue shirt and overalls, working in oil lands.

The oil-land-speculation idea appealed to him. After all, unless one worked with a pal—and his face darkened at the thought of the assumption of a pal's squareness which had gone wrong—big money was not really to be made by theft. Big money was in graft, stock selling, oil wells that were holes in the ground owned by a liar.

With the fifty dollars he had left, the Hard-boiled Egg bought an option, sold it in two days for five hundred, speculated with that and ran it to two thousand, bought another option on land in which drilling was in progress, and, to his utter amazement, had a gusher come in and make him a great deal of money honestly before he could unload on a confiding Eastern investor what he believed to be a joke well.

The Hard-boiled Egg had never had money in quantity before; a "grand" was the height of wealth to him. He had always assumed that sudden riches went to a man's head, and laid himself under a strict course of conduct lest it do so to him. He had not forgotten, although he hoped others had, that he had an unexpired term to serve with no good-conduct time off, and that an indignant judge might easily clap several more years on it for jail breaking.

To make too much of a splurge as a suddenly wealthy oil plunger, was to get his face often in the papers, and the police had such conveniently long memories! Nothing like that for the Hard-boiled Egg! He would invest his money, become a business man, buy some property, have an income, be some one! By gravy, he'd find himself a nice girl, and pretend—why pretend? She might squeal. No, he'd marry her. He didn't have to hide out now; all he had to do was keep reasonably quiet.

The Hard-boiled Egg followed his several assumptions to the letter. For five years he observed his prohibitions. He didn't make a splurge. He dressed quietly. He joined a couple of nice clubs. He invested in some local enterprises in the small Western city in which he located. He met the nice girl and married her. Somewhat to his own surprise, he found married life very pleasant, and the respectability he had sneered at as an assumed cloak of protection became something he preferred to have than to be without.

He took on flesh; the hard lines of his face softened; the look in his eyes was no longer suspicious, but often friendly. He had "arrived."

The red deer will risk the dreaded odor of a human being to see what a piece of paper on the end of a stick may mean. The small boy cannot keep away from the orchard he has robbed. The superstition that murderers have an irresistible impulse to return to the scene of their crime is founded in fact. The Hard-boiled Egg was no exception to the rule.

He had often wondered about the "little affair" which had given him his start in life. The poor old chap in the store was lame, or clubfooted, or something. He hadn't had a chance against any one as clever and as well-trained with a life preserver as the Hard-boiled Egg. He had hoped the storekeeper didn't miss that hundred-and-some too much. Once, when quite mellow after a most happy cocktail party with the president of the local board of trade, the Hard-boiled Egg had a thought of sending a hundred dollars to the storekeeper.

But that, of course, was foolishness; a hundred dollars was a hundred dollars. Besides, he didn't remember his unknown benefactor's name. It was in Ashton, he knew that—sort of general store. Well, some day when he went East again, he'd drop in and see the old chap. Of course, he might be dead. But not from that little tap—not that one! Besides, he had searched the city papers—if he had killed him, there would have been a squawk. Doubtless there had been a mighty squawk for a little town when he had come, too! Maybe the sheriff had gone around looking for fingerprints—as if he'd know what to do with one if he found it!

The Hard-boiled Egg sneered at the thought. The city police were stupid enough, but these country fellows—one

could assume in advance what they would do, and be right, every time. They assumed every one went to bed at nine o'clock, so they didn't stay on duty afterward. They assumed all men to be honest—so they turned their backs to strangers. The fellows who assumed the wrong things got in trouble —those who assumed with common sense like a successful ex-convict he knew, beat the game. He wondered what had become of Sam—caught long ago, probably.

The chance to visit Ashton and exult a little at his own clever assumptions came sooner than the Hard-boiled Egg expected. The banker had an opening to make a killing, in New York. He invited the Hard-boiled Egg to go along. The Hard-boiled Egg promptly countered with the proposition that they take Mrs. Banker, and his wife, and go in the Hard-boiled Egg's car.

"I'd like to make a motor trip," he said. "I haven't been on Broadway since I settled out here."

It was so arranged. Mrs. Banker and Mrs. Hard-boiled Egg were friendly, the car was new and good, there was plenty of royalty money coming in, not to mention the lucrative investments—— Why not?

The Hard-boiled Egg planned the route carefully. He wanted to reach Ashton quite casually, and at a time when it would be natural to stop; say at noon. It would be funny to drive up to that general store and ask directions to a good restaurant! Maybe he would see the old man. He wasn't at all afraid. No one had seen him. No one knew his face; the dark, pointed Vandyke beard had changed him, and even so, no human being had seen him enter or leave Ashton. Yes, it would be interesting.

The Hard-boiled Egg rather hoped he would hear something about the assault and robbery. He had an artist's pride in his work, and he knew he had left no trace. Why, the old man really owed him a debt of gratitude for his good work—a tap on the head like that left no permanent ill effects. A burglar might have killed him!

Besides—the Hard-boiled Egg chuckled to himself at the thought—doubtless it was the only real excitement either he or the village had ever had. How they must have talked, wondering who could have done it! Very likely, the storekeeper had said it was a whole gang of thieves who had put him out after a desperate fight—country storekeepers were like that! They probably dated things in Ashton as before or after the desperado robbed the general store! The Hard-boiled Egg chuckled again. Well, he dated a lot of things as after that time, himself—pleasant things, like money and position and a pretty wife and putting it over on his associates——

It was a very pleasant tour. The weather was kind, the ladies were friendly, the Hard-boiled Egg was young enough to enjoy having a snappy car and plenty of money and a securely hidden past. Particularly did he enjoy the inward laughter in which he could so often indulge at the trick he was playing on the world. Even his friend the banker—"Lord, what a fit he would throw if he knew that one of his stockholders, his wife's friend and his own confidant, is an ex-con!"

They arrived in Ashton at eleven thirty, July 11, 1927, five years after the "little affair." The long time was an added factor of safety for a visit that needed no such help to be entirely secure.

The Hard-boiled Egg drove slowly up the main street, looking. He didn't remember the name, but he would know the store, he was sure.

"Dear, what place is this?"

"Ashton, I think—is it, Bill?"

"Damfino—what's the difference?"

"Why are you stopping here?"

"Eats and gas!" responded the Hard-boiled Egg. "Ah, there is a store."

"You can't eat there," his wife said.

"No, but he'll know where I can eat, m'dear! Won't be a minute——"

The Hard-boiled Egg drew up in front of Sergeant Bowers' Metropolitan Store with a flourish. Inside, he noted with much amusement that things looked exactly the same—even the chain pulls on the lamps. There were the piles of goods on the long counters, there was the little office, the cash register, the—by George—if there wasn't a rack of ties just like there was five years ago. He'd like to buy a tie—well, that wouldn't be wise, of course.

He was honestly pleased to see the merchant limping behind the counter. Of course, he knew he hadn't killed him, but it was nice to be sure.

"Good morning!" The Hard-boiled Egg spoke pleasantly. Why not? The old chap had done him a real service—giving up his money, and staying unconscious until the Hard-boiled Egg got out of town, before he raised the alarm. "Good morning. Will you tell me where I can find a restaurant?"

Two men standing at the counter turned at the question, but the Hard-boiled Egg looked straight at Bowers.

"Mrs. Benson's, five doors down."

"Thanks. I'll take a cigar——"

The Hard-boiled Egg followed down the line of counters to the cigar case. The lame merchant hobbled along.

"Thanks—three for a half? Fine! By the way——"

"Yes?"

"What did you ever do about catching that rascal who robbed you?"

Sergeant Bowers looked up. The two men standing at the counter drew near, evidently interested.

"Why, what do you know about it?"

"I was passing through here as a tourist the next day. Every one was talking about it, you know. Did you ever catch him?"

For some reason the lame storekeeper didn't answer. He came out from behind the counter and walked down toward the front door. There he turned—and there was a police service .44 in his hand.

"Stick 'em up and be quick about it!"

"Why—er—what the——"

"Stick 'em up, I tell you! Peter, frisk him!"

"Frisk him, sergeant?" Peter was grown up now, but not a policeman.

"Search him, you idiot, for a gun!"

"I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!" The Hard-boiled Egg was indignant. "I come in here to make a purchase and ask a direction and you hold me up! Surely, these gentlemen are not robbers, too—in this town? I'll have the law on you!"

"He ain't got no gun!" announced Peter.

"Sure?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure."

"You can put 'em down! I don't need nothing but these!" Sergeant Bowers held out his hairy hands. With a spring of unexpected liveliness for a man with only one leg, Sergeant Bowers landed with both hands on the Hard-boiled Egg's shoulders. There was a cry, a scuffle, and the Hard-boiled Egg was on his face on the floor, while Bowers tied his hands.

"Now, then," he cried, to the astonished Peter and Mr. Preston, "we'll let this bird explain to the judge how he knows I was robbed!"

"I told you how I knew it!" stormed the Hard-boiled Egg. "I was here, I heard them talk about it."

"Mighty curious!" answered Sergeant Bowers, grimly. *"I never told it to a living soul!* I knew you'd come back some day, and I'd get you!"

The Hard-boiled Egg got slowly to his feet, dazed. He knew a ruined life when he saw one. Softly, under his breath, he confessed defeat:

"By George! Sam *was* right."

A Chat With You

FROM Charles Daniel, of Melbourne, Washington:

"I just want to comment on the choice of stories you offer. You pick on dandies by the hundred. A. M. Chisholm's last was a knock-out. Come again, Chisholm, old man. When you have another brain storm, we expect to see it in THE POPULAR. The idea of the footnotes under the contents is a good one, as most magazine buyers glance at the cover, open the book, and if the titles don't mean much these few remarks under them do. Heaps of times it sells the book. More power to you!"

* * * *

K. C. BEALE, of New York, is brief:

"POPULAR WEEKLY! This is great. I want to tell you how much I enjoyed 'The Dollar God.' Yours for success."

From Higgins Brothers, Fayettville, Tennessee:

"At first I did not like the change from a semimonthly to the weekly of your magazine, but now I think it is fine. I have been a constant reader of the magazine for twenty-odd years and want to say that 'A Silver Mine and a Widow' was one of the best I ever saw, read and thoroughly enjoyed."

Mrs. Ida Knight, Klamath Falls, Oregon, says:

"Waiting two weeks for the next issue was a long, too long a wait. So the change to weekly was very welcome, so much so that one day makes a big difference. So here is my first and only kick. Our dealer cannot put THE POPULAR on the stand till Friday. You said Thursday. Why do we have to wait that other day?"

Our original plans were to have the magazine issued each Thursday, but the wide distribution forced us to make it a day later. Friday of each week is now the date of issue.

A. H. Doolittle, of Brooklyn, says:

"I was very much pleased to hear you were going to put POPULAR out oftener. It is my favorite magazine and is in a class by itself."

E. E. Rockwell, of Featherville, Idaho, writes:

"I read the first number issued of THE POPULAR in a mining camp in Washington State in 1904. I have missed very few copies since that time. I have them held for me at news stands, sometimes for months. I have had them sent to me hundreds of miles, and when I was at the front with a fighting regiment, although over age, I managed to receive almost every copy, carried them in my pack with the other essentials, until read. I have read them by camp fires, in a shelter hut by the light of a camouflaged candle, with my back to a pine tree in the depths of remote forests—in fact, just wherever an outdoor man might happen to be. I was glad to see it appear in semimonthly form and more so to see it come out as a weekly. Keep it up as long as you can get the high-class fiction you are running now. By the way, I have paid as much as six francs for a POPULAR at a French news stand."

The above are a few letters taken out of a big pile. We are encouraged and grateful to them for the hearty encouragement they give us.

* * * *

GETTING back to our argument that a good many famous books of the past would be better if they were written in briefer form, we still maintain with Shakespeare that "Brevity is the

soul of wit." Indeed, Shakespeare's greatest play, "Hamlet," suffers from its extreme length in that it cannot be presented in full on the modern stage, and the playgoer who sees it and has not read it misses a good deal of the essentials of the plot. Years ago the poor people—that is to say, the great mass of mankind—worked very hard, had long hours, scarcely any leisure and did not read at all. The "leisure classes" had far too much of the commodity, and they read to kill time as much as anything else. Now everybody works, everybody has some spare time—but not too much, and the author owes it to his reader to tell his story as directly and simply as possible.

We have an idea that people talk about the great books of the past more than they read them. They stay on the shelf a great deal.

Now we will ask a question. How many readers of this magazine have read any or all of the following books *through* except as part of a required course at school or college? Boswell's "Life of Johnson," Smollett's "Peregrine Pickle," Sue's "Wandering Jew," Carlyle's "Frederick the Great," Hugo's "Les Miserables," Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina," Cervantes' "Don Quixote" or Ruskin's "Fors Clavigera."

Now step up, please, and let us hear from you. And remember, please, that Friday is the day, every week.

The Popular Stories

In the Next Issue, December 31, 1927

The Last Word in candy—Home-Made

and here's the way we Make it:

FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1¼ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

There's nothing else like home-made candy. Ask anybody. Except, of course, Oh Henry! And the very reason Oh Henry! *IS* so good is that it's made the home-made way.

We tell the world how to make Oh Henry! because we are proud of the fact that it's made of the very things that come out of your own pantry—made just as you'd make it yourself. You *CAN* make it yourself! But *WHY* when you can walk up to any candy counter and say Oh Henry!

Oh Henry!